Someone to Stay by BigBadLittleRed

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Summary:

It's been seven months since Jonathan Byers returned home after being presumed dead for almost two years. The people of Hawkins are unknowingly being held captive by an elite organization of people who are responsible for all of the hellish going's on that have occurred in the past few years.

Agent Fox Mulder of the FBI has stumbled onto an old case from 1983, and has reason to believe that something else is going on besides a few missing kids and dead bodies. Visiting the town brings them from 1994 to 1987, where they're put face to face with people who hold a grudge against anyone who even resembles a mysterious government authority figure. Can they earn the trust of Steve Harrington and others before it's too late? Or will they all fall victim to the organization's insidious plans?

1. The Boys Who Came Back To Life

Notes for the Chapter:

> (I promised a sequel and here it is! Mulder and Scully will be featured heavily in this fic, but you really don't need to know anything about The X-Files except maybe what the two agents look like. Any vital information from the show will be provided in the story if need be. I really hope you all enjoy!)

Mulder had become accustomed to the quiet of the stuffy basement that housed what he mentally classified as his livelihood. The air smelled like an attic with a hint of the stale coffee that he'd made hours ago, a cold cup of it forgotten on his desk as he shifts through seemingly endless files. There are quite a few he had been mulling over since Scully had gone home, she had suggested he do the same but he rarely slept anyway.

It felt pointless to go home to simply toss and turn on his couch, so he often stayed behind at the office and just waited for her to return. Of course he still slept, he had taken a short nap about an hour earlier and he felt more awake than ever at the moment. He had his overnight bag in his car; he always carried spare sets of clothes around for late nights away from his empty apartment.

But right now he had to find their next case, and the folder currently propped on his lap was quite the interesting read. He loses himself in it, he had glanced at it earlier and placed it on a stack of possible leads but this one was really an odd one. There were some cases that he took on a whim, of course Scully would say they were all heat of the moment ideas but it was a rarity that he took a case without first thoroughly attempting to debunk it.

It was a couple of mutilations, missing kids, and a woman's accusation that the government had kidnapped her son for government experimentation. This seemed like every run of the mill weird occurrence, one that Mulder might turn away as simply being a hoax as Scully might call it. But he takes hold of the copy of the poster of the young boy involved in this, twelve year old Will Byers. He'd be what, twenty-three by now? He had been reported missing by his mother, they pulled a body out of the river that had turned out to be a fake when he was recovered not long after.

Mulder frowns down at the missing poster, and then turns his eyes back to the paperwork. It was local police that had taken care of it all, no real follow up except for a medical report from 1986 for Will Byers' older brother Jonathan. There was no information on what had happened, but the information detailed that the older boy had apparently been missing for two years, having gone missing about a year after his brother's disappearance after the death of their father and a local boy. There was no search or anything of the sorts, which seemed to be the same for another teenaged girl that had gone missing in '83. They always assumed teenagers were runaways, and it seemed that this wasn't the case. But there had been a funeral service not long after Jonathan disappeared, and in the same fashion of his younger brother's incident, he had turned up alive afterwards.

Mulder sits up in his chair and sets the folder down on his cluttered desk, separating the two medical reports from the rest of the police information to look through the information on both boys during their hospital stay. Will's injuries had been minimal and inconclusive, Jonathan's had been more severe. Mulder takes hold of a couple of Polaroid pictures tucked in the folder of the file and flips through them. Scars ranging from self-inflicted to surgical incisions and torture marks, it was gruesome.

He wondered if the Byers still lived in Hawkins, Indiana.

He sets out to work right then, eager to find more information on this case. Scully would be back in the office in a few hours, Mulder would have to be ready to plead his case.

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The door to the office opens and pulls his eyes away from the pictures; Scully walks in looking professional and proper as always. Her hair is perfectly styled, not fancy but still elegant, and her She settles her bag on the floor next to the coatrack and places her coat on one of the knobs, giving Mulder a look that acknowledges his disheveled appearance but also tells him that she wasn't going to bother bringing it up. They ran in circles with the argument, which was already old in the little time they had known each other.

"I'm not going to share a car with you if you don't go home and shower," She reminds him, he smiles and gathers up the file. The woman gives him a wary look as he holds out the folder; she takes it and sinks down on the other side of the desk.

"Hawkins, Indiana… 1983 to 1986…" He says with badly restrained excitement, Scully holds up one of the pictures to get a better look at it. Mulder can see the shock in her eyes as she examines the photos of the injuries sustained by the elder Byers brother.

"My God, Mulder… What happened to this boy?" She murmurs as she begins to scan the medical file, Mulder places his arms on the desk and rests his chin against it.

“He went missing for almost two years, and then showed up out of the blue at the local police station. He was covered in self-inflicted wounds along with surgical scars, torture wounds, healed breaks and fractures all over and the doctor reported possible evidence of electroshock therapy. There was even some sort of metal thing implanted in the back of his neck. Jonathan Byers was described as incoherent, severely traumatized, and possibly even suffering from brain damage.” Mulder details for her, Scully looks up at him with a narrowing of her eyes and her mouth a thin line.

“So he was kidnapped, how exactly is this an X-File? Did he say he was kidnapped by aliens?” She questions sarcastically, Mulder shakes his head and reaches over the desk to point at the newspaper article he had located.

“In 1983 his little brother Will Byers went missing, they located a body that was identified as his but then later after the burial he was located. The body was a fake, Scully; someone was trying to cover that up. His mother, Joyce Byers, claims that a government facility had something to do with it and that her son’s disappearance had been purposefully covered up by the same people that caused his disappearance!” He taps on the paper for emphasis, the red haired woman sighs tiredly.

“Mulder, did she offer any proof of these allegations?” She questions, Mulder stands up and moves around the desk to crouch down next to her. He runs his fingers along the top corners of the papers to find what he’s looking for, and then pulls it to the top of the pile.

“She claims that the local power company had something to do with it,” He goes on to explain, Scully scans over the paper as Mulder shifts on the balls of his heels. “Just before Will Byers went

missing, there were reported electricity problems." He says with conviction, the redhead offers him quite the look.

"Because of electric storms, Mulder. That doesn't prove the distressed word of a traumatized mother."

"Well what about the supposed animal mutilations in '84?" Mulder says with a small frown. "One of the victims was a thirteen year old boy that was in the same grade at the same junior high as Will Byers. The other was their estranged father, Lonnie Byers. That can't be a coincidence."

"What are you saying, Mulder? That these boys killed these people because a government facility told them to?" She questions with a deadpan, Mulder stands up straight and towers over her slightly. It doesn't make him feel more powerful in the slightest, but at least he can step away from her accusing gaze.

"I don't know, Scully. But there was something going on in Hawkins during that time period, and it revolved around those two boys." He says with a small shrug, Scully closes the folder and stands up.

"Those boys are gone, Mulder. They probably moved away from the prying eyes of their small hometown just to get some peace. Did you see the scars on that older boy? God knows what he had to go through, what his entire family dealt with. It was almost a decade ago anyway, the eldest is only a few years younger than you." Scully hands him back the folder roughly, Mulder scowls at her as she turns away and begins to fix up a new pot of coffee.

“Can’t you just trust me on this one, Scully? We go and check it out, see if we can track down the Byers family and see what happened?” He pleads gently, Scully shakes her head.

“Dredging up awful memories isn’t wise, besides Mulder, what would be your reasoning?” She asks as she turns to face him.

“Because since 1986, there hasn’t been any information from there, nobody has moved out either.” Scully hesitates at that, frowning at him in confusion.

“It’s a small town, Mulder…” She defends quietly; Mulder shakes his head and wags his finger at her.

“Not one person, Scully. In almost a decade, not one person has left that town! It was brought up recently in a consensus report; in fact, there are some people who say that Hawkins doesn’t even exist anymore. It hasn’t been on the map since 1986.” He swears, pulling out a recent map and one he had dug up in an old dusty archive. He takes a moment and places a finger on the location of Hawkins on the old map, finding the exact place on the other map and pointing it out as well. “A whole town is missing, Scully; we can’t just pass this up.” Mulder says quietly, watching as the cogs in Scully’s mind grind and tick, he can pinpoint the moment she caves into her curiosity.

“All right, Mulder, but we’re just going to visit. We stop in, check it out, and see if we can find any evidence of the Byers. If they don’t want to talk then we leave, simple as that.” She tells him sternly, Mulder nods his head in excitement.

“You’re the man, Scully.” He assures with a grin, she rolls her eyes and there’s a slight quirk of amusement in her lips as she turns away. Mulder gathers up his files for Scully’s viewing pleasure and then steps across the basement to grab his coat off of a chair. He sets the files down on the woman's desk across from his. “I’m gonna go home and take a shower, we got a long drive ahead of us.” He winks at her as he slips out of the door, barely catching a glimpse of her unamused face before he closes the door behind him.

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The drive is something that Scully is still trying to grow accustomed to, but she’s not sure she can ever get used to driving for eight hours in a car with Mulder. When he drives he’s pretty quiet, so she usually leaves him in the driver’s seat for a good while, but she’d practically take his hand off if he started reaching for the radio. His music taste was godawful, and he always wanted to sing along, Scully couldn’t sleep through his screeching.

But there were statistics on drivers falling asleep at the wheel that she couldn’t just ignore, so eventually she’d have to drive about halfway through. At first Mulder would talk and gesture and sometimes count roadkill on the side of the road, the man was an enigma. Eventually though, he would fall quiet and doze off. Scully could keep her eyes on the road and have some peace and quiet for just a bit. If she glanced over at him on occasion to watch his sleeping face for millisecond intervals, nobody had to know.

The case was what occupied her mind mostly, she had read through it a little more extensively and she had to admit (not to Mulder just yet, his ego was large enough) it was an interesting one. The town had been through a whirlwind of hellish incidents that were never quite thoroughly explained, and Scully had a few theories

but she'd like to really settle this one. She didn't want to bother those poor people that had gone through so much, the Byers family had gone through so much and she hated to tear open new wounds. However, it was just a lot that hadn't even been properly investigated.

For such a serious series of events, it wasn't very well documented or investigated. The filed cases were left open and unsolved, without even an attempt at explaining anything. It was almost as if (as Mulder suggested) nobody had bothered to find anything, like it had been swept under the rug. After Jonathan's return, there was no report of what happened to him, but perhaps he never said anything. Even so, there should be at least some reports filed by the local law enforcement, but the reports were only a few pages of basic jargon. There were no witness statements when the boys went missing, no hunting, the only body search ever done was the one that recovered the fake dead body.

This raised far too many questions, why was there a fake body at all? Some sort of staging, another cover up, it all was like scattered puzzle pieces that itched at Scully's brain and made her want to reach Hawkins faster. They would be there soon, and they'd hopefully be able to track down what exactly happened. Perhaps it had something to do with the father, but she couldn't make any clear deductions without a full sight of it all.

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"Mulder," She reaches over and smacks at his shoulder, the man grumbles something and his nose is squished against the window for a moment. Scully glances back to the road and smacks him again, watching the mile marker pass them by. "Mulder, we're just outside of Hawkins." She says, watching the man sit up in her

peripheral as she adjusts a little in her seat.

She had been driving for a few hours now and was definitely ready to stretch her legs. Something else she was ready for was the sight of Hawkins, just to make sure people weren't right about the town disappearing off of the map. Sure enough, in just a few minutes, a sign is off towards the left.

Welcome to Hawkins, Indiana!

It's a little dirtied, vines creeping up the metal posts and lapping at the edges of the white wood that was faded from years of weather. The sight of it makes her feel slightly uncomfortable, like she wasn't supposed to be here, she watches it pass. There's a sort of electricity in the air around her, and for a moment she's sure that Mulder's paranoia is contagious.

The car jerks to a stop suddenly, the dials on the dash all fall as the lights flicker off. They sit in silence for a moment, Mulder is glancing around them out the windows with that excited puppy look on his face.

"Battery must have burned out," Scully mutters as Mulder shakes her shoulder and then quickly opens his door to scramble out. He gets jerked back by his seatbelt in his hurry, and he reaches back to clumsily unbuckle himself before spilling out onto the road. Scully sighs and follows him, albeit a little more lackluster, around to the trunk as he pulls out his patented orange spray paint can.

"Stopped at 2:47, what about yours?" Mulder questions eagerly as he checks his watch, Scully glances down at her own and

finds it at the same time.

"Same," It too isn't working, and while it is strange, Scully doesn't think aliens are involved. "It's probably just some sort of power surge, all those electricity storms and whatnot." To her statement, Mulder gestures up grandly to the open blue sky.

"Not a cloud in sight, Scully!" He cheers with delight, and just then the car starts up without warning. Scully hesitantly walks back over to the driver's seat and peers in to look at the car clock. The sound of the spray paint being coated onto the road where they stopped is a familiar sound.

12:43 PM

"Clock's way off over here, must have had a faulty reset." She says as Mulder comes around and leans in to look at the clock.

"It's set two hours earlier, never seen that before." Mulder climbs into the car and leans back to dig in his bag as Scully climbs into the driver's seat once more. He pulls back into his seat and starts scribbling down something on a notepad, Scully sighs and puts her seatbelt back on. "We should head to the local police station; I have some questions for this Chief Hopper, if he still works there." He explains, Scully nods her head and kicks the car back into gear as Mulder puts his belt on. She couldn't get behind crazy theories, but she could get behind the start of a valid investigation.

"Ever think about settling down somewhere like this someday, Scully?" Mulder questions as they drive through the town, it's rather simple and small, like something out of an old movie. The

cars parked on the sides of the streets are all older, and the few people walking on the streets make it feel like the setting of a 1980's family friendly town that is quickly turned into a horror scene by some maniac.

"Do you, Mulder?" She asks curiously in reply, he leans forward as they drive through the streets, balancing his arms on the dashboard. There's a school around the corner, the lot is pretty empty, although a few cars are scattered about. School shouldn't be out yet, but perhaps spring break was in effect.

"I always thought it'd be nice, the whole picket fence and 2.5 kids thing." He admits to Scully, who frowns thoughtfully as they pull off to the side near a small brick building labeled 'Jimmy J's Diner'. The entire town gave off a slightly antique vibe, like it was something out of the past, it was rather nice. It reminded her of her teen years, at least the times when her family were stationed in nice neighborhoods like this.

"Let's ask for directions to the police station," She suggests, Mulder nods his head as he observes the neon sign on the door with a vaguely distracted look on his face.

"Yeah, I could go for a milkshake." He grins to Scully, who rolls her eyes fondly as they get out of the car.

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"Anything else I can get you?" The man at the counter ("James Barnum, but everyone calls me Jimmy!") asks as Scully sips

at her drink and Mulder pops a fry into his mouth. He seemed like a nice man, and a few people gave them odd looks on the way in, but he greeted them rather cheerfully. He had given them directions to the station but Mulder had begged Scully for lunch so she had caved. “We don’t get many strangers in here anymore, let alone FBI agents.” Jimmy tells them with a gray mustache topped smile.

“I was wondering, do you know if the Byers family is still in town?” The man’s face flickers slightly, like a haunted memory had come to the forefront of his brain as his dark green eyes glance away in a nervous gesture.

“What do you want with the Byers?” A man a few seats down from them asks curiously, having been finishing munching on a sandwich and minding his own business until just now. He looked to be in his thirties, perhaps he knew the older boy when he was in high school?

“Just curious about some of the stuff that happened back in the day.” Mulder offers vaguely, Scully can’t help but be suspicious, why was everyone acting so squirrelly about it? There were a few more eyes now on them, many people had fallen quiet. She supposed incidents like that only happen once in a lifetime for towns like this.

“You mean when that freak murdered his daddy and that little boy?” The man spits, Scully’s eyebrows rise in surprise at his sudden malice.

“Now listen here, you leave those poor people alone.” An older woman says as she walks around the counter and wipes her hands off on a dish rag hanging from her apron.

“Edie, the boy’s a murderer, it’s plain as day!” The man at the counter says vehemently.

“Now there was never any proof of that, Douglas.” Jimmy offers in rebuttal, turning to wipe down the ice cream machine. “Those boys and their mama have been coming here since they moved here, they’re nice people.” He huffs, obviously slightly miffed at the man at the counter but not quite ready to start a fight. It’s not hard to tell that Edie and Jimmy are married, and if Edie felt so strongly about this then so must her husband.

“Now what makes you think Jonathan Byers murdered his father and that boy?” Scully questions curiously to this Douglas character, who runs a hand through his slicked back dark brown hair with an irritated scowl on his face.

“Everyone knows it. Lonnie Byers was a mean old son of a bitch but his son was the crazy faggot of the family, he ain’t right in the head. His father was one story, but to kill that little boy for picking on his brother….” His voice trails off, he shakes his head.

“That’s not what happened!” Edie denies with a slap of her rag to the counter.

“And then he up and disappears, shows up out of nowhere even more of a mess than before. His mama must have hidden him away for a while or something, knew the cops might come looking for him.” The man waves his hand and takes a large swig of his drink, he continues after he swallows. “But you know Joyce and Hopper just got married, she’s got the Chief under her thumb. If you ask me, that

queer needs to be put to the chair for the shit he's done." Mulder looks over at Scully with an incredulous look on his face, Scully shakes her head and glances back down at her plate.

"Get on out of here, Douglas, nobody wants to hear it." The elderly woman behind the counter shoos at the man, who rolls his eyes and takes another sip of his drink.

"Fine, but we all know it's true." He slips off of the stool and drops some money on the counter, walking out of the diner.

"What do you think happened?" Scully questions the older woman, who turns to her with a sad look in her gray eyes.

"That boy never was quite right, shy little thing, clung to his mama for years. He kept to himself mostly, never said much. That man of Joyce's was horrible and we've all known that he wasn't the kindest to his family either." She steps around the counter and sits down next to Scully, folding her hands on the table and pursing her lips in the slightest. "After Lonnie left, Joyce struggled to keep up with the bills; Jonathan started working when he was fifteen. He became the man of the house, he was a good boy." She acts as if she's trying to promise this to Scully, begging her to believe her.

"And then Will went missing." Mulder adds from over Scully's shoulder, he's still eating without pause. Leave it to Mulder to find food more interesting than the case he'd begged for them to take. He takes a sip from his straw as he keeps his eyes locked on Edie, who nods gravely in reply.

“After Will came back it seemed like a miracle, but it wasn’t long before that boy was killed.” She glances away in thought, sighing quietly.

"It was Jonathan that found the body, that was what started the rumors." Jimmy explains.

“He was a bit of a troublemaker, bullied all the little ones.” She tells them, frowning slightly. “I’d chased him off one time or another for bothering Will and his friends, calling them names and such with his pals.” She shakes her head.

“Do you think it’s possible Jonathan Byers could have killed him?” Scully asks, the woman looks over to her husband, who makes an almost unreadable expression.

“I don’t know what happened to him or Lonnie Byers, but I do know that Jonathan Byers has more than a few screws loose.” Jimmy tells them quietly, he turns and heads back into the kitchen.

“Doesn’t matter anyway, he doesn’t leave his house very much anymore.” Edie stands up and follows her husband around and into the back.

“Well, I’m intrigued.” Mulder wipes his mouth with a napkin. “Shall we go see what the Chief has to say about this?” He asks, Scully nods her head, feeling like they had gotten more questions instead of answers through this conversation.

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“Hello, I’m special agent Dana Scully and this is my partner Fox Mulder, we’re with the FBI.” Scully explains to the older woman at the front desk, who had been writing on a sheet of paper when they’d stepped inside. The station is rather small, with only a few desks and only the woman in sight besides a man sitting at a table across the room reading the paper.

“What can I help you with?” The woman asks cautiously, her placard on the desk reads ‘Florence Welsh’.

“We’re looking for Chief James Hopper.” Mulder states as he leans a hand on the desk, the woman glances down at his hand with a look that suggests he should probably remove it and he does with an awkward smile. Scully spots a wall of pictures just a few feet away, and steps to the side to take a closer look.

“He’s out of town right now on business, sorry.” Scully hears the woman say, she squints her eyes at one picture.

“Well perhaps you could-“

“Mulder, come look at this.” Scully gestures a hand back, Mulder approaches her and peers over her shoulder as she points up at one picture. It looks like a family gathering, a bunch of kids and a few adults in what looks to be some sort of park. They’re all gathered around a bench, some smiling and laughing, others grinning ear to ear. She had spotted Will Byers first near the bottom, and after a careful scanning she had spotted one young man in particular.

“That’s Jonathan Byers.” She says quietly.

“What do you want with Jonathan Byers?” Florence questions as she walks up behind them.

“We’re just looking into what happened, not much of an investigation done, just tying up loose ends.” Mulder offers her with a nod; the woman gives them an unimpressed look and takes the picture they were observing down off of the wall. “Who are these people?” He asks.

“Well, this is Chief Hopper and his wife Joyce.” She points to the older couple near the other side of the picture, then turns a manicured nail towards the kids crouched down on the ground near the bench. “Will Byers and his friends, the Chief’s daughter, Elle…” She explains, and then gestures up at the three older kids seated casually on one side of the bench. Jonathan Byers is on the far end, next to another boy and then next to the unknown boy is an older girl. “Jonathan Byers, Steve Harrington, and Nancy Wheeler.” She lists.

Scully can’t help but observe Jonathan carefully, she had barely recognized him but had spotted him last second after seeing Will’s face. Jonathan was wearing sunglasses, his hair a tangled mess and the only one wearing a jacket. He doesn’t look very old, a little pale in the cheeks but he still had a boyish type look to him, it must be an older picture. The boy next to him, Steve Harrington, has an arm around both Jonathan and Nancy’s shoulders with a broad smile on his face. But Jonathan’s expression is rather flat, only a slight quirk nears the edge of his lips that suggest the beginnings of a smile.

“The Chief has a daughter?” Mulder questions, Florence

nods and points out the girl with the smile so big her eyes are squinted together with delight. Her hair is wavy and cut short enough to where it hangs just past her ears, and she's leaning on Will Byers with her head on his shoulder.

"Her name is Elle, sweet little thing. The Chief adopted her in '84" She explains, Scully blinks.

"Right around the time of the deaths of Lonnie Byers and that local boy, correct?" She questions, Florence looks rather irritated with the question and hangs the picture back up on the wall.

"I suggest you let this investigation run cold, let things be. This town is just starting to calm down; we don't need any feds stirring things up." She tells them before turning away, Mulder hovers over near the few desks across the room, doing his usual nosing about.

"Do you happen to know how we can get in contact with the Byers?" Scully questions hesitantly and the woman offers her a glare in reply. "We're just trying to get this over with, ma'am." She promises, Florence seems to not believe that. The door to the station opens with a jingle of a bell, and a man walks in with a sigh.

"Flo, I spotted that Richards kid and his pack of buzzards hanging out near the edge of the woods. That stuff out there is dangerous, I'm going out there to make sure they don't touch anything or start any fights-" The man pauses in his words as he catches sight of the agents in the station, frowning a little. "Can I help you?"

“Agents Mulder and Scully, what exactly is dangerous in the woods?” Mulder greets before questioning the man as he shakes his hand, the man gives the side eye to Florence and then sizes Mulder up.

“Uh, Jeff Adams.” He greets cautiously. “There’s some old shrapnel out there, don’t want anyone getting hurt.” He explains, and even from a few feet away Scully can hear the lie in his voice.

“Who exactly would they be starting fights with?” Scully asks, the man clears his throat.

“The Chief’s daughter and her friends hang out there, got some tree forts and such.” Florence speaks up; Scully frowns and looks over at Mulder, who seems to be showing the same puzzled expression. If it was so dangerous out there, then why were the Chief's daughter and friends allowed out around that area?

“How old is his daughter, again?” She had to be in her early twenties considering she looked to be around Will’s age in the picture.

“Sixteen in July, sweetest little girl but she always hangs around those boys of hers.” Florence offers with a wave of her hand, the man near the door smiles. Scully frowns, sixteen? Those reports must have been off, except Florence had confirmed that it had happened in '84... What the hell was going on here?

“That new girl has been hanging around as well, the little redhead; it’s good for her to have another girl around.” The man says

with a nod of his head, Florence turns and sits down back at her desk. “Anyways, I should probably head out for patrol.” He mutters rather nervously.

“Of course,” Scully smiles, they follow the man out and get into their own vehicle.

“We’re following him, right?” Mulder questions, she nods.

“Definitely.”

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They trail behind the man for a few minutes, pulling into an old trail entrance just to stay out of sight as the man pulls over. They watch as he talks to a couple of boys near the edge of the trees, there are three of them all in their early teens. Adams must give them a bit of a speech because they talk for a while. Once the boys leave he steps a little closer to the tree line and stands there for a moment before walking back over to his car and getting in. They wait for him to drive off before getting out of the car.

“How could she be fifteen if she’s friends with Will Byers?” Mulder questions as they walk down the road towards the edge of the trees, Scully shakes her head.

“Maybe those case files have the wrong dates on them.” She suggests, although she doesn’t quite believe that herself. But

Mulder's theories would be much wilder and much more impossible, so she had to say something.

"All of them have the same date printed multiple times, Scully. That receptionist even confirmed it was in '84!" He insists as they step down an incline into the trees and through the leaves.

"Do not suggest time travel, Mulder, I swear to god." She grumbles as she steps carefully over a tree root. She had not prepared for a hike in the woods, definitely not, and some of her favorite shoes would be suffering for it. Although she felt a little better hearing Mulder complain under his breath about his own being messed up.

"Time vortex, Scully. A small pocket dimension stuck in time. It would explain the lack of communication from this town to the outside world." He tells her seriously, she rolls her eyes as they continue walking. They walk for a good way until they come to a slightly obvious path and follow it deeper into the trees. Soon, there's the sight of something metal on the ground not far ahead.

"What the hell is that?" Scully murmurs as they get closer, as the trees thin out ahead she can see a rather large wooden structure in a tree not far from the metal thing on the ground. Mulder hurries forward to get a closer look at the metal contraption, which had antennae and wires running through it. It almost looked like a generator, something that belonged in a government facility, not in the middle of the woods. It was humming, like it was turned on and electrically charged, which seemed impossible with no visible source of energy.

"I have no idea," He says as he observes it carefully, running his fingers along a blue wire and opening a metal panel near

the bottom. Scully glances around for any sign of someone nearby, not seeing anybody for a moment. There are two wooden structures up in two trees on either side of the machine, both looking newly built and not too shabby in their construction.

"Don't touch anything, Mulder. You don't know what that thing is." Scully scoffs as she smacks his side gently in warning; the man grumbles something under his breath and crouches down to continue fiddling with the machine.

Scully spots movement out of the corner of her eye, turning her head to watch a young man come staggering forward from the trees. He's got a blindfold on, his hands outstretched as he walks slowly through the leaves. He's dressed oddly for warmer weather, a hoodie zipped up to the very top of his collar and dark colored jeans with one single tear on the left knee.

"Mulder," Scully whispers, nudging his shoulder, the man swats her prodding hand away so she reaches over and grabs his ear. "Mulder," She says, more insistently, the man turns his head.

The young man turns a little and stumbles in the slightest before righting himself, there's a small smile on his face. Scully can't tell for sure but she recognizes a rather unique hairstyle from an earlier picture, a slightly receding hairline with tangled blonde locks that flop to the side without order. There are a few unidentifiable marks on his jawline and neck, like scabs of some sort, but other than that he looks to be okay.

They both watch him quietly as he turns in a circle, sighing quietly before whistling loudly. There are a few whistles in response, from several different areas, the young man's face breaks

into a small smile and he rights his position before he begins walking forward again.

There's a creak of wood from behind them and Scully turns her head to watch a girl come climbing down a ladder from one of the treehouses. It's Elle Hopper, Jim Hopper's daughter, followed closely by one of the other boys. She seems indeed young, dressed in a pair of jean shorts and a loose tank top with red and purple flowers dotted all over it and a red ladybug barrette in her hair to match.

"Jonathan, game over." Elle calls out, Scully watches the older boy frown in confusion before taking a pair of sunglasses from his pocket and then pulling his blindfold down. He puts the sunglasses on, falling still as his head turns in Mulder and Scully's direction.

"Who are you?" The tall boy behind Elle asks warily, his hand reaching out to pull the girl back gingerly. Suddenly another boy comes rushing from the bushes, with a head of curls and a backwards cap on his head.

"Stay away from there!" He commands with a point of his hand, Mulder points towards the machine behind them. There's movement all around them, and Scully feels uneasy about the way they're all looking at the agents.

"What is this?" He asks curiously, Scully jumps when a figure suddenly slams into her partner. They topple to the ground together; rolling to a stop with Jonathan Byers perched on top.

“Jonathan, no!” A smaller boy leaps down from the opposite tree house; Scully reaches for her gun as the elder Byers brother pulls his arm back and punches Mulder in the face. He becomes a blur of messy fists thrown all towards Mulder, who struggles to hold him back. Will Byers is racing onto the scene, Scully pulls out her gun and aims it at the young man on top of her partner.

“Back off or I’ll shoot,” She commands strongly in hopes that this won't end with someone firing off a round but Jonathan shows no sign of slowing in his assault. Mulder grabs one of Jonathan’s wrists before he can deliver another blow, trying to push him off. She can see some of the kids taking off through the trees, at least two of them, but she’s more focused on the young man currently trying to assault her partner. She really doesn’t want to have to shoot this guy, but he’s giving her no choice.

“Don’t!” Will steps between Scully and his brother in an attempt to use himself as a shield, turning away from the woman to grab at the older boy. “Jonathan, stop!” He tugs at Jonathan’s upper chest from behind; Jonathan jerks his elbow back and knocks the smaller boy onto the ground without effort. Mulder takes the chance to knock him off and scramble back away from him. Jonathan’s face is bright red and his sunglasses are crooked on his face, wet stains on his cheeks that are either sweat or tears, probably both.

“Hands up!” Scully demands as Jonathan tries to lunge for Mulder again. He pays her no attention, only stopped by the curly headed boy from before by latching onto his waist and yanking him back off of Mulder. The older boy shouts in frustration, Mulder scrambles back towards Scully.

“Jesus Christ,” The man breathes as he glances up at Scully, who shares the same thought. This guy was holding nothing

back, desperate to attack Mulder.

“Where the fuck is Steve?!” The boy holding Jonathan demands as he narrowly avoids a flailing elbow to the face. Will is pulling himself off the ground, obviously winded from his brother’s hit. The curly headed boy lets Jonathan go when one of the older boy’s legs kick back and nail him right in the shin.

“Son of a bitch!” The boy hisses.

"Bastards!" It’s the first words she’s heard Jonathan say, spat with anger and hatred, Scully pulls back the hammer of her pistol as the younger Byers grabs at his brother with desperation. Mulder gets to his feet, a cut on his cheek surrounded by a blooming bruise.

“Jonathan, please!” Will begs, Jonathan tries to stand only to have the curly headed boy latch onto his legs. He collapses forward onto his knees, still struggling against the teens holding him.

“I’m warning you, Mr. Byers!” She snaps, and there’s two figures appearing on either side of her.

“I’m warning *you*, lady.” A girl’s voice says, she turns her head slightly to find a redheaded girl with a yellow slingshot aimed right at her head. She's got her hair tied back in a ponytail and a jacket around her waist. “Put the gun down or we’ll embed every rock in the general vicinity into yours and your friend’s heads.” She says with a glare of fiery blue eyes, Scully turns the other way to find a dark skinned boy with a similar slingshot aimed in the same fashion

at Mulder. He's wearing a bright red bandana on his forehead.

What the hell was going on?

“Jonathan!” The two kids that had run off earlier are sprinting behind an older boy, the one from the picture, Steve Harrington. He’s wearing a t-shirt and jeans, his hair is clinging to his face damply and he practically drops to his knees to slide across the leaves and right into Jonathan.

“We’re federal agents!” Mulder says as he reaches into his pocket, the boy with the bandana steps a little closer and tightens his grip on his sling shot. Jonathan is making increasingly frustrated and distressed noises as he fights against the older man’s grip he’s now stuck in. Steve’s bigger than any of the teens that had tried to hold him down so far, closer in age and size. It’s still a little baffling that they don’t seem that old, they looked like teenagers themselves. How could they only be this old?

“You aren’t supposed to be here,” Elle says as she steps forward, Scully lowers her gun. The two kids with slingshots slowly follow her lead and settle their slingshots at their sides, still firmly grasped in their hands.

“The deal!” Jonathan’s arm is outstretched towards Mulder, his glasses having fallen off at some point. His teeth are bared in a snarl and he’s hitting and kicking with all his might to get out of the hold he’s tightly secured in. “You promised!”

“Promised what? We’ve never met you before!” Mulder

insists with an exclamation, waving his hands in an erratic gesture before holding out his badge to let everyone see.

"Jonny, come on." The older man is trying to get him onto his feet, but he's still not cooperating, tear filled eyes focused on Mulder with burning rage.

"Let me go!" Jonathan pries at the man's arms around his waist as he's tugged upwards; his voice is scratchy and cracks with distress. He looks like a madman, hair askew and pupils so large they almost swallow his irises. All Scully can think of in this moment is that Jimmy and Edie weren't lying, Jonathan had a few screws loose. "I won't go back!" The young man coughs as tears spill down his cheeks and his face grows even redder with exhaustion and exertion. He looked far too young in that moment, like a scared and confused little boy.

"Nobody's taking you back, I promise." Steve promises him over his ranting, hands still holding strong and his chin propped on Jonathan's shoulder as he carefully pulls him backwards away from the agents.

"I can't forget, I won't!" He's babbling now, less angry and more upset as his eyes are drawn away from the agents. If Scully didn't know any better, it looked like a break of some sort. "They want me to stay awake, I have to protect them!" The man holding Jonathan is hushing him quietly and trying to soothe him, the kids scattered about are eerily silent and all eyes are on Scully and Mulder. They blatantly ignore the young man currently making quite the scene, as if they'd experienced something similar before and wanted to give the young man a shred of dignity.

“Haven’t you caused enough damage?” The boy with the curly hair and the backwards cap lisps, looking guarded and angry. They all keep their eyes carefully away from the older boy just a few feet away having a steady mental breakdown, mumbling hysterically to himself in between fits of sobbing as the man behind him cradles him in his arms and tries to quiet him and his useless squirming.

“We didn’t mean to startle anyone, we were just looking around.” Scully offers first, Mulder wipes at his bloody lip and sighs as he steps closer to his partner. “We didn’t expect to be attacked.” She says, rather sharply.

“You’re breaking the deal, you can’t be here.” Will speaks up, tears in his eyes, hair a mess and clothes rumpled from his scuffle with his brother.

“What deal? We don’t know anything about a deal.” Mulder says with a frown, the redheaded girl beside Scully scoffs in disbelief.

“We haven’t said a word to anyone, just leave us alone.” The boy next to the Chief’s daughter crosses his arms with a scowl. He’s taller than the others, with a mop of messy dark hair and pale freckled skin.

“We have no idea what you’re talking about, we’re federal agents.” Scully tells them seriously, trying to convey her honesty.

“Liar!” Jonathan attempts to jerk forward out of Steve’s grasp but he’s obviously weakening to a point where he can’t struggle

as hard. He coughs again, a nasty noise that's followed by a wheezing inhale.

"Jonny, stop." Steve instructs as he rubs his hand up and down Jonathan's chest, obviously trying to distract him.

"Traitor!" Jonathan sneers, not towards the agents this time, but it seems to be directed to the man holding him. Steve flinches in just the slightest, but doesn't release him. Jonathan sobs again, his energy returning as he tries to pry the hands from his waist, legs kicking up and off the ground as he leans back against the man's chest in an attempt to free himself.

"He's gonna hyperventilate, Steve." Will says as he steps over to the older boys, Steve shakes his head and then casts a glare over to Scully and Mulder. Jonathan goes practically limp in his arms, his legs are bent slightly which suggests that if Steve released him he'd probably crumple to the ground. He's quieter now, his face is wet and his cheeks are a dark color that looks dangerously unhealthy, not to mention the soft wheeze accompanying every inhale. He looks almost drugged, eyes dazed and staring into nothing. He looked like he needed a hospital to be completely honest.

"I'm not leaving you guys with these cronies," Steve tells them sternly, the redheaded girl steps away from Scully and over to the others. As she passes, she grabs the dark skinned boy with the bandana and drags him with her.

"How about we all go somewhere we can talk calmly?" Scully suggests with her hands up in a peaceful gesture, the group of kids send her some of the angriest glares she's ever seen. "No weapons, just talking, we can explain why we're here." She assures,

watching as everyone looks around to their peers for any complaints or ideas.

"They already know where we live, Steve." Elle says, as if reasoning with the older boy, who scoffs and shakes his head.

"You think I'm going to let them in the house so they can bug the place again? Jonathan's already paranoid; they can't be in the house." He snaps immediately, Elle moves forward and leans over to whisper something to the older boy, he sighs tiredly.

"All right, back yard…" He mutters, a couple of the kids groan and complain loudly but Elle shoots them all a serious glare. Steve turns and urges Jonathan forward, and when he doesn't comply he takes a moment to lift him off the ground. Jonathan's practically limp against Steve's chest, Scully can't see how he can carry him at all but perhaps the lithe young man is stronger than he appears.

The redheaded girl stares at the others for a long moment, some of the kids nodding in affirmation before she turns her head back to Mulder and Scully. Her blue eyes scan over them with hard calculation, as if she were trying to find a reason to tell them to take a hike.

"Follow us," She permits quietly, and then they're walking.

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“They don’t really look like the guys we usually deal with,” Will mutters to Elle as they follow closely behind Jonathan and Steve. Jonathan was propped chest to chest with Steve, the older man keeping one arm under him and the other tightly held around his back.

“The man looks like papa,” Elle says softly, avoiding Will’s eyes as she leans out and takes one of Jonathan’s hands that were limply propped over Steve’s shoulders into her own. She shakes it gently, smiling softly in Jonathan’s direction despite his obvious lack of presence in reality. Jonathan’s head is tipped against his boyfriend’s shoulder, his eyes were barely open and what was visible seemed unseeing.

“He does?” Will asks, glancing back towards the two strangers following just behind Dustin and Mike. The man is tall, his cheek smeared with blood from the cut Jonathan had inflicted with one of his fists. The woman is much shorter, but her eyes are rather cold and calculating, which unnerves him. He didn’t like anyone that caused his brother such distress, especially when weapons were threatened. The woman had pulled a gun at one point and Will had run in front of her before he could even process the danger to his own person.

Jonathan didn’t mean it, not really, he was caught off guard. Sometimes he got confused and scared, he lashed out a lot. It didn’t mean he was trying to hurt Will or Dustin when they tried to stop him; he wasn’t seeing them, he was reacting to something that had already happened and trying to defend himself. To have seen two strangers infiltrating their safe space wearing clothes similar to those that are associated with the people in charge of his past suffering really set him off.

Will didn't blame him, the man and woman had given him some serious heebie-jeebies. They had been messing around with the machine that Nancy had taken so much time to build for them. It was to keep the creepy crawlies in the Upside Down, and so far it had been working. Nancy had been attending Berkeley for a while now (under strict supervision of the people who were behind all of this), but she kept steady contact with her family and Jonathan and Steve. Her machine had a lot of scientific jargon as an explanation, and even though Will really likes science, she was far out of his lead with her physicist talk. They called the machine the Equalizer and just left it at that.

"Same haircut, tall, just a lot younger." Elle tells him simply, she had grown a lot stronger emotionally over time. She didn't talk a lot about her childhood but mentioning papa had gotten easier for her, she felt nothing towards the man anymore. They used that word 'papa' as his name, because they never really did find out who he was. They originally figured he was dead but Elle had seen some things back in the day, and it suggested that the man was alive somewhere and most likely was the source of Jonathan's current condition as well.

"Creepy," Will shudders a little at the reminder of the man. Even though he had never met the man Will felt a strong hatred towards him for putting Jonathan and Elle through so much. "Think it's a trick?" He asks her, she was the one with the best intuition; she was pretty much always right when it came to trusting her gut. Dustin called it her 'Jedi mind powers', Nancy called it just being a girl.

"I don't think they're lying," Elle says quietly, smiling brightly at Jonathan once more when his eyes flicker over her. She was rather sweet on Jonathan; they all were in a way. He was mentally frayed and he couldn't function quite correctly anymore but he was still Jonathan most of the time. He'd sacrificed too much for

the lot of them to just abandon him; the least they could do was make sure he was safe and happy.

They reach the edge of the trees and the beginning of the large wooden fence that went around the perimeter of Steve and Jonathan's house. It had been installed a few months before; it was actually Will's idea after experiencing one of the many times looking for Jonathan in the woods late at night when he wanders out of the house. It still happened of course but the fence gave them a little longer to realize he was missing before he got too far. It had gotten to be a rarer thing but it still happened on occasion, when Steve slept too heavy to hear him get out of bed. It was a little traumatizing to find his brother kneeling in the dirt and mumbling to himself in his underwear like he had been abducted by aliens or something.

Will rushes past Steve to open the back gate for him, and from the look on the older boy's face, he's not too happy. Today had been the first time Jonathan had gone back out into the woods in a few weeks, he'd been pretty sick for a while. The doctors weren't lying when they said Jonathan's immune system would be weak; he'd had two colds and even the flu in the few months since he'd been home. This time however, he'd gotten a case of bronchitis and it had set Steve into overprotective boyfriend mode. They had promised not to do anything strenuous, and a couple games of locator were definitely not strenuous… However, having a complete meltdown in 90 degree weather was pretty bad, especially wearing his normal heavy clothes.

Elle opens the back door for Steve so they can get inside; Will hesitates a few feet from the door. He turns away, awkwardly shoving his hands into his pockets and watching the two supposed FBI agents step into the back yard ahead of Lucas and Max. Mike hovers a little closer to them, he reaches out gently and pats Will's arm with a silent 'You okay?' intended just for him. Will nods his head, turning his eyes to watch Dustin start to take off his shoes as he

nears the pool.

"Elle, Will, why don't you go help?" Mike suggests suddenly, Will glances over to the girl he often thought of as his sister for affirmation. She nods her head, already looking eager to get inside to see if Jonathan was all right.

"You'll be okay out here?" Will asks the others with a wary glance to the strangers hovering near the patio furniture. They didn't seem to be a threat at the moment, but they probably shouldn't let their guard down anyway.

"We'll be fine," Dustin waves him off as he dunks his feet in the water, not nearly as affected by the prior events as the rest of them. They had dealt with some of Jonathan's fits on occasion, but he seemed to be getting better until recently. He was more agitated, more paranoid, and a little less present in the real world. Will figured it was because of being so sick; being sick brought out the worst in everyone didn't it?

"Besides, Jonathan likes you and Elle better than the rest of us." Max offers bluntly, she wasn't bitter, just stating the obvious. Jonathan did prefer their company and Steve's over anybody else's; they were a lot tamer than the others. Will and Elle could watch movies or listen to music for hours, Jonathan found comfort in simple repetitive things that would make most people itch to move and be more active. He practically listened to the same mixtape every day; it was just the way he was. He'd been sort of like that before, to a lesser degree, but Will found it pretty familiar and reassuring.

Elle leads the way as they step into the house; Will closes the door behind them after a final glance to his friends and the

possibly dangerous strangers sitting down across from Max and Lucas at the patio table. Elle walks around the counter and leans her head into the living room, Will follows her and finds Jonathan seated at the couch with Steve crouched in front of him.

"How is he?" Will questions softly, feeling the slightest bit at fault for all of this. Jonathan's cheeks were still red, his hair a mess and his skin shining with a bit of sweat. His eyes were glassy but they were flickering over his boyfriend's face, it was a good sign considering the way he often checked out completely. Steve was unzipping his jacket carefully and pushing it off of his shoulders.

"He shouldn't have been out there," Steve murmurs as he slowly pulls Jonathan's arms from his jacket sleeves. He takes a moment to observe both of his arms once they're out in the open, scarred over and speckled with a few scabs. Jonathan still had a habit of itching at his skin, it had gone from his arms all the way up to his neck and face and no amount of nail clipping and telling him to stop could completely deter him.

"We couldn't have known those guys were gonna come snooping around." Will defends quietly as Elle steps away into the kitchen.

"What if he ran? You know I don't like it when he's wandering around in the woods like that, he's confused enough as it is." Steve says with his voice low and angry as Elle returns with a damp wash cloth and sinks down on the couch next to Jonathan.

"Jonathan," She whispers, touching his upper arm to warn him before she gently begins wiping at the older boy's sweaty and grime covered face. He flinches only a little bit, eyes still focused on

Steve, but he was in one of his zones. He'd be out of it for a while, his fits often made it hard to communicate with him.

"He's not a baby, Steve." Will huffs, sitting down on the coffee table and glaring down at the carpet. "You can't lock him in the attic for the rest of his life just to keep him away from everything bad." He says with a bit of bitterness.

"I'm not trying to keep him locked away; I just don't like him in those woods." Steve shakes his head, rubbing his hands together distractedly as he stares at Jonathan intently.

"Where should we go, then?" Will demands with a wave of his hand. "It's not safe for him around Hawkins and you know it, those assholes would tear him up in a second if they could." He rubs at his eyes anxiously, unable to bare thinking about how much shit he heard at school about their family. Max kept him away from stuff like that, she became a quick shield away from all the bullies and taunting and she never let him hear stuff like that but he knew it still existed.

"We've discussed this before, Will… We can't move, we made a deal." He says with a tight gesture of his hand, Will shakes his head and stands up.

"Yeah, we keep our word but they never do." He argues as he crosses his arms, Steve turns slightly to glare at him.

"They have so far." Steve snaps, and Will feels his hands tightening into fists. Steve was so goddamn hardheaded, none of

them knew how to get out of this situation but he had just given up.

"What do you call the feds outside then?" His voice rises in the slightest and Elle shoots him a glare.

"Stop it," She says simply, a warning to the both of them. Steve takes in a deep breath and exhales tiredly before looking back at Will once more. He looks tired, eyes a little bloodshot and face pale. That was one of the reasons they had taken Jonathan out to the woods, Elle had wanted to help Steve out and give him a break. Jonathan had gotten a lot better since his return but he was still a full time job, from nightmares to keeping him from scratching his skin off or wandering off in a delirious state, Steve had given up everything to do it. As much as Will appreciated it, he often felt like it wouldn't be long before he snapped. He dreaded the idea of Steve calling it quits, but at the same time he knew that Jonathan and Steve loved each other and they would soldier on through anything.

"This argument is over right now, okay?" Steve says seriously, and Will's eyes drift over to Jonathan. Elle had cleaned all of the sweat off of his face but he still looked a little pink in the cheeks, eyes glazed over and exhausted.

"Fine," Will permits softly, nodding his head. "Take him upstairs and let him rest," He says as he uncrosses his arms and tucks his thumbs into his belt loops.

"I don't want you guys out there with those people," Steve says with a shake of his head, reaching out and running his fingers through Jonathan's hair to make it a little more presentable. Jonathan's eyes flutter just a little and he looks down at his knees, in his own little world. His dazed presence earned him the name 'space

cadet' from Steve, but it was only ever said in fond kindness.

"Think we can't handle ourselves?" Will asks with a raised eyebrow, Steve rolls his eyes.

"I don't want Mad Max putting a rock in a federal agent's skull. We have enough problems on our hands; we don't need to add hiding a body and going to federal prison to the list." He mutters, leaning over to push Jonathan's bangs away and kiss his forehead. There's no response from Jonathan, his hands resting on his knees and his eyes focused on nothing but aimed in the direction of the television across the room.

"We're not bringing Jonathan back out there," Will says firmly, and Elle looks to Steve with an expression that clearly conveys her agreement with Will. The young girl crosses her arms, and even as a lithe teenaged girl her posture and expressions often exhibited the true strength inside. Even though she was a few months younger than him, he often saw her as a role model, a figure of pure strength and loyalty.

"Of course not, I'm not an idiot." Steve says with a scowl.

"Debatable," Will mutters jokingly and Steve fakes a laugh before reaching out and pushing at his leg. Will and Steve argued a little more than they probably should, but Will ultimately trusted him and his judgment despite their disagreements.

"You guys take Jonathan upstairs and get him to lie down. I'll go outside and tell the feds to get lost." He explains, Will

stammers an objection but Elle simply nods her head. He wasn't sure what it was about being left alone with Jonathan in these states that made him so nervous now, it just felt like a lot of responsibility. He never wanted to hurt his brother or do something wrong that might upset him, and right now was one of the times he definitely didn't want to be alone with him.

However Elle never had a problem with Jonathan; she accepted Jonathan's new fractured personality without hesitation. She was good with him, could sense his discomfort a mile away and handled him with ease. They shared similar traumas, fears of the dark and being trapped, she felt for him because she had experienced pain from the same people that had hurt him as well.

"C'mon, Jonathan." Elle urges quietly, taking his hand gingerly into her own and standing up. "Come on," She coaxes again, Will watches quietly as the older boy gets to his feet slowly. Steve watches them for a moment before turning and heading towards the doorway to the kitchen.

"I'll be back in a minute." He calls, before the back door opens and shuts.

"Will, stand behind him?" Elle asks of him, the teen nods and follows behind them closely, placing a gentle hand on his older brother's back as they walk up the stairs. The house is pretty quiet, nobody but Steve and Jonathan lived in this big four bedroom house. Of course two of the bedrooms were usually dubbed as Elle and Will's, and the other one was preserved for any of the other kids visiting. Steve and Jonathan's house was a pretty nice sanctuary away from parents or annoying siblings, when it got to be too much they all eventually ended up at the house as long as you didn't mind most likely being woken up by Jonathan's nightmares or

sleepwalking.

Will follows Jonathan all the way up the stairs and they get him safely into his shared bedroom with Steve. Jonathan sinks down onto his bed and rubs at his eyes tiredly, Will can feel affection swell in his chest as he steps forward and touches his brother's shoulders carefully. Jonathan looks up at him, his eyes are irritated and bloodshot, the skin around them swollen and tinged pink. He had been so upset earlier, it always hurt Will to see his brother hurting and even after months of him being like this it still made his chest ache.

"Hey, man." He smiles weakly and watches Jonathan's eyebrows scrunch together just a little as his mind tries to puzzle out what it can. Steve was still working with him to help his frequent forgetfulness and confusion; luckily he had started to recognize them a little easier over time. There was less of a hesitation on his good days when they greeted him; his bad days however were another story.

"Steve?" Jonathan looks past Will, and he tries not to feel too hurt considering Steve was the one that spent the most time with him nowadays. Jonathan felt safe around him, Steve was the person that kept him grounded and in the present. Steve would die for Jonathan, and that intense loyalty was returned by the younger man often. Their love had taken a bit of break in the beginning, Jonathan's trauma placed in the front seat. Steve had been okay with it, but he'd been even happier when Jonathan started seeking him out for affection that he didn't ask for from anyone else. Will often found it amusing to watch him demand kisses when Steve was in the middle of a conversation.

"He's downstairs right now, he wants you in bed by the

time he gets back." He explains gently, leaning down to take off Jonathan's scuffed up sneakers off his feet. Jonathan's fingers brush the top of his brother's head, and then pat his shoulder gently as if he were reminding himself what was going on.

Jonathan shuffles back onto the bed and drops down onto his pillow, sighing softly as he turns on his side and his eyes flutter closed. He most likely wouldn't fall asleep for a bit, he was just resting his eyes from the light. Will probably needed to go back out and find his sunglasses, as they had fallen off of his face at one point. He'd throw a fit later if he didn't have them; he relied on certain objects like security blankets nowadays. Will turns his gaze to Elle, who's seated at the foot of the bed and watching the brothers fondly.

"He'll be okay, just needs a nap and maybe some ice cream when he wakes up." He says with a small smile, Elle giggles quietly and nods her head. There's a moment of quiet between them, only the sound of the air conditioner clicking on after a second.

"We should probably tell mama," Elle says quietly, and Will sighs before dropping his face into his hands.

"She can't do anything; she'll just get all worried and call Hopper." He grumbles quietly, glancing up when the girl moves a little closer to sit down right next to him.

"Last time we did something alone…" Her eyes shift back to where Jonathan was lying quietly in a curled up position and looking so very vulnerable, Will feels a knot tighten in his stomach. She didn't have to say it; last time they did something alone Jonathan got hurt. He didn't want that to happen again, to *any of them*. "I don't want anyone to get hurt anymore," She says softly, reaching her arm

around Will's shoulders.

"Neither do I." Will agrees with a small nod, dropping his head on the girl's shoulder. "I wish Hop would just hurry up and come home." He mutters, feeling lost and a little vulnerable himself. They were just kids, and it reminds him that Jonathan was just a kid when he'd been taken, Nancy and Steve as well. They were all just kids, mixed up in things that were far from their full comprehension. These people had ruined their lives in the worst way possible, screwed with their heads and their sense of safety. Will would never grow out of his fear of the dark, they'd all have nightmares for the rest of their lives most likely, and none of this would ever become a distant memory.

"He has to work with them, for us, for Jonathan." Elle reminds him, rubbing his shoulder, and in that moment he felt like the younger brother. She reminded him of Jonathan, who even now, had a habit of worrying about his brother when he was in his right mind. Elle was selfless, she cared so much about those in her life, and she took care of the boys more than they took care of her. She was a lot like Nancy in that way, the girl who even though she was hundreds of miles away still worried about her 'boys', Jonathan and Steve.

"I know," Will says, almost inaudibly, frowning down at the floor.

2. The Interrogation

Notes for the Chapter:

> (So I know it's been a while since I updated but Ao3 now has this weird thing where it takes a lot longer to edit because it replaces certain punctuations with different symbols. Basically I noticed it and got too lazy to edit, so I'm sorry... But here we are!)

Steve shuts the door behind him, feeling a mix of anger and exhaustion twisting together into a serious irritation directed towards the two suits sitting at his back porch table. Just the sight of them made his skin crawl, he'd seen quite a few officials in suits and it ruined his whole kink for office sex. But of course that didn't matter anyway considering Jonathan was his one and only and they spent their nights going over flashcards and trying to help him remember what a fire extinguisher is called. Not that he would trade anything for that, he'd spend the rest of his life keeping Jonathan safe rather than run off with someone he could never love as dearly as the man he loved today.

The man and a woman appear like any of the suits before them. The woman has red hair and is currently arching a disbelieving eyebrow towards Lucas and Dustin, who were spilling their guts about Will's disappearance. The man was leaning forward in anticipation, seemingly interested in the boys' tale. His cheek has a small cut on it and the skin beneath it is starting to bruise, from a particular hard hit from Jonathan.

Dustin was currently recounting a story of Will's disappearance and the Demogorgon. Of course it most definitely was not story time and he didn't want them here, not if they had *anything* to do with the fact that his boyfriend's entire life had been practically ruined.

"Hey, Tweedle Dee and Dum!" Steve snaps a bit as he walks up behind them, squeezing each of their shoulders so tight it had to be mildly painful. "Why don't you take a hike back into the woods and look for Jonathan's sunglasses?" He suggests with a tight lipped smile, the boys glance back at him with sheepish looks before standing up and stepping away. Steve watches them exit through the back gate, the both of them already bickering loudly as they disappear into the trees.

His eyes flicker over the remaining teenagers still in the backyard. Max and Mike make no move to follow their friends; Max remains leaned up against the house as Mike sits near the edge of the pool. Max doesn't look too happy with the agents, eying them cautiously, Mike had a similar expression. Even though Max was new she had a fierce loyalty, she'd believed them from day one (after a bit of a show from Elle and her telekinesis) and she refused to let anyone step on what they had. She had dealt with her brother (and their father as well) as a bully all of her life, and Steve would never forget the day that she promised Steve that she would pound anybody that looked at their little family wrong.

Of course, Max and Mike weren't the problem, not even Dustin and Lucas. They were all welcome here, even when Steve was in a mood or pissed off at them for some reason or another. They were his friends, his family, his lifeline. That's why he was so uncomfortable having these sleazy scumbags in his backyard, they had gotten far too close to his family.

"Mr. Harrington." The redheaded woman nods to him cordially; he sinks down across from them and scoots his chair a little closer to the table.

"Steve," He corrects, rather cliché but it was something he

believed in. "My father and grandfather were Mr. Harrington; it's a symbol of being a dickhead." He says sharply, settling his arms on the table. "What do you want?" He cuts straight to the point; he didn't have time to play games. It wouldn't take long before Jonathan got upset that Steve wasn't around to cuddle him for his nap, and then they'd have a whole other ordeal when he tried to come looking for him.

"We're sorry to cause trouble; we're looking into the events that have occurred in this town." The man explains easily, he's got small blue eyes that remind Steve of his creepy chemistry teacher from junior year.

"Seriously, what do you want?" He asks tiredly, pinching the bridge of his nose. "Some sort of experiment? See how far you can push Jonathan?" He narrows his eyes at the two, and when they seem genuinely surprised at his accusation he wants to scream. He couldn't trust anyone anymore, he could only trust his little circle of people that he'd had from the beginning, his family. He was always on edge, on guard, ready to kick anyone's ass that threatened his home and the people he loved.

"I assure you, whoever you think we are, we aren't." The woman tells him with a small gesture, and Steve rubs a hand over his face.

"Okay, let's say I believe you. You *are* just two federal agents investigating the disappearance your people caused, and somehow you have *no* idea what's going on." He waves his hands in a grand sarcastic gesture. "I still don't want you anywhere near here," He explains simply, and before they can speak up again he continues. "We have all been through too much." He emphasizes each word carefully.

"We understand that, Steve, we're just trying to wrap up loose ends. You have to admit this case wasn't handled very well." The woman offers peacefully, and Steve should just get up and walk away but there's something in his stomach that says these people aren't going to drop it.

"I don't think you do," He whispers as his throat tightens just a little with emotion. "Jonathan sometimes forgets where he is, or who the people he loves are, and sometimes he scratches at his skin until it comes off." He tells them with a straight face, hands slowly clenching into fists. The two people across from him show no outward emotion but he can see the way the man's eyes widen just a fraction so he must be making some sort of point.

"I take care of him full time, his brother and their friends are his only friends besides me, and we are all very tired. We know who took him; there is no mystery, so *please,*" His voice cracks a little then with genuine exhaustion. "Just leave." He stands up, turning away and offering them no second glance. Luckily, they don't try to stop him.

"Steve, we found the sunglasses!" Dustin calls as the back gate squeaks open.

"Inside, you guys, the agents are leaving." Steve says tersely without looking back, walking up the porch steps. The kids scramble along after him, and he knows without a second thought that they'll lock the back door behind them. Dustin hands him the sunglasses and he thanks him quietly before leaving them to their devices, they'd probably watch TV for a while or something. He didn't care as long as they were quiet.

Steve heads upstairs, where he finds Will and Elle seated together on the edge of the bed talking quietly. Jonathan's tucked into a ball with his eyes closed, but he wouldn't sleep for real without Steve guarding him so he's obviously awake. Will and Elle both stand up when he enters the room, offering him quiet reassurances and promises that they'll be downstairs if he needs anything. After they walk out he shuts the door and kicks off his shoes. He settles the pair of sunglasses on the bedside table for later.

"Jonny?" Steve murmurs, watching the young man's eyes flutter open as he climbs onto the bed and lies down next to him. Jonathan pushes closer and wraps an arm over his waist, sighing against his chest and fitting one of his legs between Steve's thighs. "Just take it easy for a while," He soothes quietly, running a hand over Jonathan's hair and closing his tired eyes.

"Something happen?" Jonathan asks quietly, fatigue lacing his tone. It wasn't unusual for him to be confused after one of his fits. It'd be unlikely he would remember the last few hours at all, something in his mind deciding that it was too traumatic to store, and so it would be completely deleted. It scared Steve sometimes, how he could forget some things so easy, but perhaps it was better than losing his mind completely. He remembered the important things most of the time, and that was all that really mattered to Steve.

"Nothing you need to worry about right now, I promise." He breathes against Jonathan's hair, pressing a gentle kiss to his head and skimming his fingers over the nape of his neck.

"Tell me later," Jonathan insists to him softly, without any room for argument in the situation.

Jonathan might be mentally fragile at times, a little space-y sure, but he was often stuck in his old ways of trying to be the adult. He felt responsible for a lot of things despite the fact that he really couldn't handle being in charge of those things anymore. He worried about his family (Elle included, he often called her his sister just as Will did) and Will's little buddies, he even worried about Steve on most occasions. Most of the time, Jonathan was still Jonathan, in many ways. He was there and together, there were just a few things missing.

"Yeah, sure." He agrees without hesitation, smiling at the way Jonathan huffs gently against his chest and falls quiet. Jonathan would sleep for a while, dreamless or at least nightmare-less for a good couple of hours. His fits ensured a lack of dreaming, almost like his brain was shutting down for a while and rebooting. He was dead to the world during this time, and Steve watched over him closely while he slept.

He couldn't really get to sleep though, his mind still pondering over the purpose of the appearance of the agents. They were the ones that let Nancy make that contraption anyway; it wasn't like they were harboring a giant dimension altering machine as a weapon against the government as leverage. Perhaps they were just checking in, or maybe they really were trying to mess with Jonathan.

He just wanted this all to be over with, he didn't want to have to tell Jonathan later on that two people in suits had come traipsing through the woods. His paranoia was already on a high setting and he was bound to start falling into another decline at the proof of them being stalked by the people from the facility to a worse extent than they had already been tracked. He was already having quite the bad couple of weeks because of his bronchitis, and now they had stupid government cronies snooping around.

Jonathan's breathing is easy and slow at the moment, nothing compared to last week when he was still coughing a little and wheezing. Will and Elle were right to take him out, despite Steve's earlier misdirected anger. He got grumpy staying inside for too long, and it was driving both of them up the wall.

He stares down at Jonathan's head, trying to discern if it was each individual strand that was streaked brown and blonde or if it came in separate strands mixed throughout. Of course he knew the answer, Jonathan;s hair was darker near the root and then faded out into blonde, and he spent many evenings of deep thought staring at it. But now he couldn't help but observe that there were two gray strands near the top, a signature of not his age but his stress levels. Steve luckily had not begun to gray yet, but from the amount of shit they had gone through he knew it was only a matter of time. He felt eighty, not twenty one.

Their high school days felt like they had occurred decades ago. It was all petty squabbles and gossip in the halls, trying to woo girls into his bedroom and falling in love with Nancy Wheeler. It was simple and easy, something he knew like the back of his hand at one point. He remembered when all he cared about was slipping out of class for a smoke or having a night of booze and laughter.

Out of everything he misses the companionship he had most of all, Nancy's in particular. Steve misses Nancy, and he knows for a fact that Jonathan does too. It doesn't matter that she was Steve's ex and sort of Jonathan's ex-almost; she was their most intelligent and comforting confidant. He never regretted breaking up with her, never regretted being with Jonathan. He just loved having her around, and it really stung that she wasn't just a few minutes away. It was like the third musketeer was missing, a little piece of them miles away at Berkeley doing work for the creepy weirdos that had made Jonathan this way.

Of course it wasn't their best option, but when Dustin had found that baby monster thing in January they had to think of something. They weren't sure why they let Nancy out of Hawkins, but he often suspected it was because of her intellect. She was of use to them, doing research and things of that nature on the down low. It wasn't like she had a choice in that either, because it was easy to threaten the ones you loved if they were just in arms reach. Hawkins was a bear trap that had locked its iron jaws around their ankles, and wouldn't be letting go anytime soon.

They were all like rats in a maze, being carefully contained, controlled, and observed. They had only recently discovered this when Lucas' family tried to move because his father got an amazing job offer, when it suddenly fell through because the company offering his job got shut down for funneling money from their income. Lucas was thrilled of course to get to stay, but it never sat right with any of them. It made them aware of how many people made plans to leave Hawkins but never really did, so many plans cancelled or ruined.

This wasn't the case for Jonathan; Steve had made an agreement that they wouldn't leave Hawkins. Ever. Period, end of story. Jonathan couldn't leave Hawkins, he'd be stuck here for the rest of his life, and in doing so Steve had stuck himself here. He would never leave Jonathan alone to fend for himself, he loved him more than anyone else, he couldn't imagine a life without him.

It wasn't very fair at all, the others deserved to be free, but not a single resident of Hawkins had left since 1983. Steve had made their deal through Hopper that as long as they didn't come after Jonathan, they'd stay here and stay quiet. Of course that was just supposed to be them, what he didn't know then was that nobody else could get out either. The kids would graduate in a few years, and they'd never get the chance to go to the colleges of their dreams or get out of the

town. It pissed Steve off to an extreme degree, but they couldn't find a way around it.

He simply couldn't risk any of the bad things standing in their way. He loved the people around him too much to throw caution to the wind. Jonathan was his first and foremost, and nothing could change that. So even though he kind of wanted to grab Jonathan and their things and hit the ground running, he stayed, because he didn't want to get anyone hurt. Despite their dedication, Jonathan and Steve couldn't keep everyone safe without making a few sacrifices.

Steve presses another kiss to Jonathan's head, reassuring himself that his boyfriend is safe and secure in their home. He wouldn't let those bastards lay another hand on Jonathan, Will, Joyce, or any of these kids that he is so very proud to call his family. They'd stay holed up in this house, all the luxuries in the world at their fingertips but watching the world pass like they were stuck in a bubble.

Jonathan said he never minded, but he should... He should be at NYU as they lie here, should be studying and having fun, not struggling to maintain basic thought processes and dealing with hellish nightmares and flashbacks. He never got to complete high school; it would be a miracle if he earned his GED considering Steve often had to remind him where he left his shoes despite the fact that he just took them off ten minutes before. Not to mention the fact that almost everyone in town hated his guts and the local kids had taken a liking to breaking their windows and spray painting their house.

Jonathan still had his occasional lows where he fell into a depression and sat up in his dark attic room (made specifically for him by Steve and Will) and moped for a few days, mourning his once dreamed of future. He got insecure and told Steve to just drop him off at the mental facility and leave him behind, a dramatic idea that

seemed like something that Steve would concoct if he were in that place. Everyone often joked that Steve's behaviors rubbed off on people, but he supposed it was natural for a couple to learn one another's habits without realizing it.

He got angry over his state of mind, broke down in tears and hyperventilation until Steve reminded him that he was still himself and nobody could take that from him. But it always passed, and most of the time he was very happy just to be with people he loved. Through his highs and lows, he'd never once said that he didn't cherish spending time with Steve, or hated that he had to stay inside so much, he just dropped over into his boyfriend's lap and demanded to have his hair stroked while they watched Star Trek on the couch.

Steve had known nothing would be normal ever again the day he had left the hospital with Jonathan after he'd returned home. He expected the worst, and honestly sometimes it seemed like it was just like he imagined it, but other days it was like heaven. He got to listen to Jonathan's quiet snickers when they watched TV, had the pleasure of waking up to his adorable sleep relaxed face most mornings, and the cuddles weren't too shabby either. As a young teenager he never thought that he could ever fall madly in love with someone, at least until Nancy. Nancy introduced him to a whole new world, prepared him to fall on his ass in love with Jonathan Byers. He often felt like he sounded cliché but they were prisoners to a corrupt higher power so he could be as cheesy as he goddamn pleased.

Jonathan makes a quiet noise in his sleep, more of a sigh than a whimper, and nuzzles against Steve's chest. Steve finds his new positive thoughts mixed with the comfort of having his boyfriend in his arms and it makes him just a bit more at peace; he yawns tiredly and closes his eyes.

They could handle two suits, they'd dealt with worse.

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"What do you think?" Dustin questions as they all gather downstairs in the living room, he's already reclined in Steve's Lazy Boy with a cup of soda in one hand and the TV remote in the other. The others slowly settle down into their usual places to discuss the day's events. They often all met over at Steve's house for private chats; the house was like a headquarters for all of them. Will was over here so often to hang out with them, it had just become commonplace to meet up at the location.

Will, Elle, and Mike sit together on the couch with Elle in the middle of the boys. They were like a single entity sometimes, went together like ice cream, chocolate syrup, and whipped cream. Lucas and Max sit in front of the coffee table, Lucas has had a crush on Max since the day she moved into town but he'd been too chickenshit to actually do anything just yet. Dustin has the TV on but the volume is low and his eyes are flickering lazily over his friends, intrigue written all over his expression.

"I think they're full of shit," Lucas offers with a shrug, he hands his soda can off to Max, who takes a long sip and leans back against the coffee table before craning her neck back to stare at the trio on the couch.

"I think they're telling the truth," The redhead tells them honestly, which was a bit of a game changer considering she was the second best at spotting a lie, right behind Elle. She had grown up rough, with an asshole of an older brother and shitty parents. She'd latched onto their little ragtag group, their families, and would probably

never let go. She was loyal like that, and it was one of her best qualities. "The chick was a little stiff but the dude has those honest eyes, you know? He was too much of an idiot to be lying."

"Elle, what do you think?" Mike inquires as he rests his elbow on the arm of the couch and drops his cheek against his raised fist. Will glances over at the girl between himself and his best friend, he wondered if sheâ€™d tell anyone here about the man's similarities to the crazy government dude that raised her. Sometimes things were just between them, like their late night discusses when they both had insomnia or one of them had a scary nightmare. He often felt like she was a twin sister he'd been separated from at birth, like they understood each other on a deeper level than they should. Until he knew for sure whether or not Elle would share, he would keep it a secret, for her.

"They weren't lying; they don't know what's going on." Elle says as she relaxes into the couch cushions, she turns on her seat and drops her head in Will's lap, settling her legs on Mike's in turn. They're all quiet, waiting for her to sort through her thoughts; her intelligence seemed to be scattered about in pieces in her mind and it was worth having patience to hear it. "But something's not right, I feel it." She turns her head to look at Dustin, who meets her eyes easily. "In my stomach, you know?"

She often still spoke as if she wasn't sure if she was conveying her thoughts properly, like her words weren't up to par for them to understand. She was getting better though, like a speeding train, her ambition and steel will led her way. She'd come so far, it was like watching a person grow from day one as a baby, growing up in just a short time. In just about three years, she had developed a strong personality from bits and pieces from the people around her, and sucked up information like a sponge.

"Elle's got a gut feeling, I say we follow it." Dustin says with a wave of his hand, and the others murmur quiet agreements. Elle didn't just have intuition; it was almost like she was psychic at times. They all figured that it had something to do with the Upside Down considering the few people they knew that had ventured inside long enough came out with certain senses that nobody could explain.

Will had what they liked to call his all-seeing eye; he could be blindfolded and wearing earplugs and know exactly where you were without a doubt. He was never the person blindfolded when they played Locator because he knew where everyone was without trying, it was no fun. However, playing hide and seek with him was a blast considering he always found the coolest places to hide, and he rarely hid in the same place twice (but that had been a skill of his for years).

Elle had her own powers before it all of course. It was hard to discern what she'd had before and after but she rarely used her usual powers anymore and the ones that they had mostly figured had popped up after her trip to the other side but could never be sure. She could tell the weather the day before it happened, and sometimes had a weird habit of knowing things that hadn't been told to her.

It was eerie honestly, they had a weird connection with certain things and it was just best to not question it and accept their oddities as gifts instead of whatever the hell else they might just be. Joyce took Will and Elle to the doctor for check-ups just in case the Upside Down had made them sick somehow, and Steve did the same with Jonathan. Will and Elle were in perfect health physically, and Jonathan, well that was another story entirely but that had nothing to do with the Upside Down. At least, they didn't think so... He didn't talk a lot about it, so there was no way to really tell what had happened during his disappearance.

"I don't like them," Mike says quietly, staring at the TV with his eyebrows furrowed. "That lady freaked me out, she was so..." He waves a hand when he can't find the proper word to use, and Dustin sits forward with orange soda staining his top lip.

"Like a cyborg!" He hisses with wide eyes and excitement lacing his tone, the others roll their eyes and a few huff quiet snorts of amusement at his wild imagination. "I'm serious! What if she's some kind of bot in a skin suit?! And her partner skinned a woman to get it for her!" He exclaims a little too loudly, and Will throws a pillow at him.

"Keep it down, Lovecraft! There are people upstairs trying to get some sleep." The boy says without much heat, but he conveys a serious point so Dustin shrugs his shoulders and throws himself back in his seat before downing the rest of his drink without another word.

"How's Jonathan?" Max questions, turning around on her knees and resting her arms on the table before dropping her chin down on one.

"He was a little confused and out of it, but he'll be okay." Will offers in reply, twirling a strand of his bangs on his finger idly with a sigh.

"He's always out of it, though." Lucas says, and it's more than a little insensitive to say but it's a fact none of the others were willing to state so he only receives a couple of glares and an elbow to the shoulder from Max.

"He's getting better." Elle says positively, and Will rubs a hand over his face, obviously bothered by the statement.

Sure, sometimes it seemed like Jonathan was making improving strides but the reality of it was that he was permanently damaged. Elle always compared herself to Jonathan, but Will believed that she really couldn't yet comprehend that her trauma was different from his, couldn't sort what was physical and what was mental out. Jonathan had experienced electroshock therapy which fried his brain to the point where sometimes he called popsicles 'frozen juice' and the TV a 'light box' on occasion.

Of course he didn't mean to trivialize Elle's trauma, she had been abused from birth but her ability to cope was pretty magnificent and she struggled a long time to get where she is. She was learning and socializing, still a little naïve at times and a little wary with her trust but the latter wasn't much of a bad thing considering their situation. It had been hard at first but she loved living a normal everyday life. She did have a tendency of talking like Jonathan did, when she forgot what something or someone was called, tried to describe it in a way that was so very innocent. But she didn't continuously forget like Jonathan did, it was like he was stuck in a loop, one that never seemed to end up to a certain point.

"You think those feds will come back?" Dustin asks when there's a long pause of quiet after Elle's declaration, none of them wanting to step on her hope as it would do nothing to further them or give them any sort of sense of accomplishment.

"It was only a matter of time before the shit hit the fan again, man." Lucas mutters under his breath as they all stare at the TV, not watching but not wanting to make eye contact and acknowledge the entire situation just yet.

"Well I for one am not going to kick back while a couple of suits bother Jonathan and Steve." Max says with a shrug of her shoulders and a small scowl on her face. "And I know you guys feel the same way, so let's just make a pact right now that whatever happens next we stick together." She says before glancing around the room at the others.

"We've fought off monsters; a couple of people in suits are nothing." Will smirks just a little as Elle pats his chest in approval.

"Not to mention we have Max now, so that's like twice the man power." Mike snickers with a wave of his hand in the girl's direction, the others laughing quietly as the she sits up on her knees and flexes her muscles jokingly. They all fall quiet again after, all of their minds heavy with possibilities. This wasn't a game to them; they knew the risks and how badly things could go. It had already gone wrong many times before, the stakes were high and nobody knew exactly what might happen.

"Who would win in a battle between Darth Vader and Elle?" Dustin poses the question with his cheek balanced on his fist.

The topic switch is eagerly invited as they all pour their hearts into their decisions. The boys all come together at the coffee table, arguing quietly with someone occasionally thumping Dustin on the back or pinching him when he raised his voice. Elle watches them all fondly with a small smirk on her face, snickering quietly when Max insists that instant death powers trump hands free choking abilities.

Yeah, she was scared about all of this, they all were. But they'd do

what they could and no matter what the future threw at them they would have one another's backs.

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"Are you happy, Mulder?" Scully asks with a scowl as they traipse back through the woods towards where they had entered. They had exited through the back gate after the kids and Steve Harrington had gone inside, they were all enraged and freaked out and honestly Scully couldn't find reason to be angry with them about it. They had been through a lot, and it made sense for them to be wary.

"Scully they are under the impression that the government kidnapped that young man!" Mulder exclaims as they step through the leaves together, the sweltering heat starting to make their clothes stick to them. Scully needed a cold bottle of water, a shower, and a slice of pizza.

"Jonathan Byers is obviously deeply disturbed if you haven't noticed, I'm not sure we can take his word like they can." Scully says with a shake of her head, smirking a little when Mulder trips over a tree root and almost collapses.

"But what about the machine, Scully? And not to mention the fact that there have been secret government facility experimentations for years under the nose of the public! What about MK Ultra?" Mulder demands with a wave of his hand, there was sweat on his face, his tie loosened and his shirt partially untucked. Scully mentally scolded herself for thinking he still somehow managed to look good.

"That machine we saw is just a bunch of metal put together to alieve their rampant paranoid hysteria." Scully tells him surely, but they both startle and fall still at the sound of a loud metal clank. They both make eye contact, confusion and suspicion rolling through them in uneasy waves. They pull their guns without another word, and start inching forward when there's a loud bang.

It's only a moment or two before the empty clearing comes into view, the large metal contraption in the middle of it in plain sight. There's someone there beside it, one of the metal panels on the top is off and their upper half is leaned inside. There's a tool box placed near the person's feet and Scully is starting to get a feeling that this wasn't one of the kids or their friends. They were big, legs long and sturdy enough to appear as most likely a man.

"Excuse me, sir, could you please tell us what you're doing?" Mulder asks as they approach hesitantly, guns slowly lowering just a little. The person pulls from the machine suddenly, a man with a short buzz cut and a strong jawline. He's dressed in some sort of jumpsuit, like a uniform. He looks pretty panicked at the sight of them, his eyes darting around as he holds a wrench in his hands. What could he possibly be doing with that machine?

"Sir, please state your name and what exactly you're doing here." Scully demands calmly, the man glances away and he shifts anxiously. There's a snap of a branch nearby and they both turn their eyes to spot another man in a similar jumpsuit to the first. "Freeze!" Scully calls and the first man near the machine chucks his wrench at them suddenly. They both take a hurried step to the side and take off after the men through the trees when they make a run for it, shouting for them to stop.

They reach the road, scrambling up an incline to get to the

pavement, Mulder gets there first and Scully hears him cursing as a car skids away with a loud screech of a noise. Mulder turns to look down at where Scully is pulling herself up to the edge of the road, he takes her hand and helps her the rest of the way up.

"Department of Energy, Scully!" Mulder calls with a pointed hand with badly concealed excitement in his voice. "They said it was the electric company! Scully, they were right!" He says with a flail of his arms and a grin on his face.

"What the hell is going on here, Mulder?" Scully mutters as they watch a white utility van disappear down the road.

"I don't know," Mulder reaches over and pulls a leaf from Scully's messy hair with a small frown. "But I intend to find out." He smiles just a little, throwing the leaf behind his shoulder and starting to walk back towards the car. He really did enjoy his job a little too much, but then again she did suppose it was his life's work. He actually loved everything about it, and he was far more dedicated than any other person she had ever met.

Scully rolls her eyes and follows him, but she can't help but quietly admit to herself that maybe something really was going on here. She runs a hand through her messy hair and pulls off her jacket as she approaches the car, sighing tiredly as she gets in the passenger seat. Mulder can't stop grinning as he starts up the car, ecstatic about his miniscule amount of proof. That was what she simultaneously admired and loathed him for, his driven faith in the search for the truth. He could do great things, if he didn't get himself killed first.

"I need a shower," Mulder comments as they drive and Scully drops her head quietly against the window.

"Here, here." She agrees with a small smile, and Mulder laughs quietly under his breath.

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Steve is running and he isn't sure why, there's an urgency to the way his legs pump and all he knows is that he has to find something.

" Steve!"

Jonathan, he has to find Jonathan!

He breaks from the trees and tumbles into a ditch, scrambling out despite his lungs aching in protest. He lays eyes on the men dragging his boyfriend forcefully into a black van, and suddenly he can't move a muscle. He watches in shock as Jonathan kicks and screams for his boyfriend to help him, but his feet are planted to the ground and he can feel his heart pounding as the younger man reaches for him with pleading eyes.

" Steve!"

He opens his eyes with a start, his heart still pounding and the remnants of his dream on the edges of his mind. But immediately there to soothe his nerves is the sight of his boyfriend's face above him, eyes soft and a little concerned. His hair is ruffled up and a mess, a little more than usual, and there's a tiredness to his expression that lets Steve know that he hasn't been awake for very long.

"Hey pretty boy," It's something that Steve often says to him, and it makes him smile just a little at his attempt in humor. Jonathan's voice is hoarse from sleep and his earlier screaming, but he's smiling ever so softly. Steve reaches up and touches his face gently, his index finger brushing over the imperfection of skin on his temple from his electroshock torture sessions.

"That's my line," Steve smirks up at him, and Jonathan scoffs quietly before grabbing the older boy under the arms and pulling him over into his lap. "What are you doing?" He can't help but ask, even though he allows the handling to occur despite his tired confusion. His heart is calming down now, feeling at ease with his boyfriend safe and in bed right with him.

"You love it when I rub your belly." He states quietly, one arm under Steve's head and the other slipping up under Steve's shirt. There's terseness to his voice, Steve can already tell he's feeling off. There is currently a giant hole in his brain at the moment that he's so desperately trying to fill. He wondered if Jonathan actually hoped it was another fit, because he often confessed fearing forgetting his everyday life without any stressors. Steve arches into the touch with a shivering sigh as his eyes slip closed, he indeed did like his belly rubbed. "What happened?" Jonathan questions softly, and Steve blinks his eyes open.

"Whattaya mean?" He hums, and Jonathan frowns just a little. There's an odd feeling in Steve's chest, Jonathan was acting a little weird, like his brain wasn't malfunctioning like it usually did after a fit. It wouldn't last and he knows it, knows not to get his hopes up that it won't happen this time.

He would piece together that he had experienced a fit, and then start shutting down in ways Steve couldn't quite comprehend. It was

almost like he was forming the memories provided with him, like his brain was taping together information given and sewing it all up into a false memory. It took time for him to come out of this, and until then he would be rather quiet and a lot like the Jonathan he had taken home from the hospital. Until his expression and movements were slow and stoic, and his speech was reduced to simple words and echoes of phrases he's heard recently. He didn't know if it was a coping mechanism or some sort of reaction, but it happened every time.

"You had a nightmare," Jonathan mumbles, and then does that weird blinking thing he does when he starts getting anxious. His eyes open and shut a few times rapidly, like he was trying to make his mind work faster. "And I can't remember coming home from the woods." He says even softer before looking Steve in the eyes, those big brown doe eyes that Steve was weak for.

"I-In my dream, you got taken again." He admits, and Jonathan's hand twitches on his stomach but doesn't stop its soothing petting motions. His face is concentrated, listening intently with his eyes focused on Steve's stomach. The soft circles were calming in a way that both made Steve relax and kept Jonathan concentrated on something besides his anxiety. "And... You freaked out in the woods."

"Another fit?" Jonathan's eyebrows scrunch together and his mouth twists into an angry scowl, frustrated with himself. "I didn't hurt anyone, right?" He looks stressed at the idea, already trying to get out from underneath Steve. "The kids, Steve!" He complains as the elder refuses to let him up, Steve turns over onto his stomach on Jonathan's lap and then gets up.

"You didn't hurt any of the kids," He promises quietly before pulling Jonathan back against him and wrapping his arms around his

waist before he can try to get away. "Let me explain, all right? Stop squirming, please." He asks patiently, and Jonathan falls still with a rather unhappy huff. He drops his back against Steve's shoulder and crosses his arms.

"What?" He demands grumpily, already in his stage of pouting which often accompanied the guilt over his fits.

"Two feds came into the woods and scared the shit out of everyone, you went into attack mode and full body tackled the dude." He tells the other gently, feeling Jonathan tense up uncomfortably. Steve knew it made him upset to lose control, to not have his emotions and actions kept in line. There was absolutely nothing they could do; no amount of medication short of a tranquilizer or those awful anxiety meds (the ones that made him a drone) would help. Steve gave him the occasional sedative if he got worked up to a certain point, but he couldn't shove pills down a man's throat that was screaming and thrashing even if he wanted to. He just had to let it run its course until he tuckered out or came down off of it and rejoined reality, although it was more of the former than the latter.

"Feds?" Jonathan questions, confusion evident in his voice. "What's that?" He whispers as his arms uncross, his hands drop into his lap and he starts rubbing them together. Steve watches them carefully to make sure he won't start picking at the scabs on them or start a new wound entirely instead.

The doctor called it excoriation; it was an obsessive nervous habit that wouldn't go away no matter how much they tried to break him of it. He has scars along his collar bones, legs, and some on his neck and chin, but it was the worst on his arms. Jonathan was extremely self-conscious of it; he wore long sleeves all the time except to bed and on occasion when they were home by themselves.

"Feds, like federal agents." He elaborates quietly, Jonathan still had a hard time remembering certain words, and it took a while for him to actually remember what he's told about it. But Jonathan kept asking, and Steve kept telling, because he'd get it eventually. This was the first time this word had been brought up; he takes a deep breath when Jonathan turns his head to look at Steve with open puzzlement in his expression. "People who work for the government."

Bad, very *bad,* an absolutely *terrible* idea to use that word but it was the best way he could explain it. Jonathan pales and blinks rapidly; his hands come up and hold tight to the arms around his waist. It's both a relief and a stressor, all he can think is at least he wasn't screaming. Steve bites his lip when the grip becomes painful, he pulls Jonathan tighter to him and hooks his chin over the younger's shoulder in an attempt to ground him.

"Jonny, hey, listen to me." He murmurs, feeling Jonathan's locked fingers spasm at his voice. "You're safe," He promises easily, and when Jonathan starts to shake his head in argument he continues. "The kids are downstairs, your mom is at work, and you are right here with me." He reassures, able to feel Jonathan's heart pounding when he presses his chest a little firmer to the trembling young man's back.

"They're gonna take me," Jonathan says faintly, and Steve shakes his head. Out of all the little phrases he liked to repeat, that was on the top of the list. He'd say it over and over again, 'they' were coming, and 'they' were going to take him.

"No they aren't," He says firmly, and when Jonathan pulls in a shaky breath Steve kisses his shoulder. His fingers start to relax, his

painfully tight grip relinquishing slowly as he takes quiet deep breaths. "You are going to stay right here with me, remember?" He hums, and Jonathan nods jerkily after a moment's hesitation.

"Right here," Jonathan echoes, and Steve smiles and kisses his shoulder again. "I'm going to stay right here, with Steve." Jonathan reminds himself, his left thumb stroking over Steve's skin gently. He often repeated what he was told when he couldn't find the words to say himself. He would say it over and over again until he found the right words, or at least until someone else provided them for him.

"That's right, now what do you say we go downstairs and get some ice cream?" He questions softly, Jonathan turns his head to look at him with a bewildered expression.

"Ice cream," He says with a bit of confusion, and then frowns. "We were talking." The younger reminds him with his eyebrows slowly scrunching together once more, and Steve shakes his head. If he kept telling him right away he'd start really freaking out and Steve would probably have to get a bucket for Jonathan to be sick in. It had to be told in pieces so his mind had some time to put it all together and not get all scrambled up.

"I'll tell you more after ice cream," He promises, and Jonathan sighs shakily but doesn't argue this time. Steve releases the other before slipping off of the bed, holding out his hand, Jonathan stares at it for a moment with that all too familiar vacant look in his eyes. It always reminded him of the days at the hospital, when he'd been nothing like himself. But this was temporary; he would snap out of this and be himself again in a few hours or so. Jonathan looks up at Steve, frowning and then swiping his tongue over his bottom lip in a familiar gesture. The gears behind his eyes were turning slowly, grinding together as they tried so damn hard to keep going.

"Glasses," He mumbles as his gaze flickers to the floor, and Steve walks around to fetch the sunglasses from off of the table. Jonathan takes them with shaking hands and puts them on, standing up and taking Steve's hand when it's offered once more.

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They had calmed down from their debate (which had spiraled into many other debates until Elle had made popcorn and they all gave up on talking in favor of satisfying their hunger) and were all still gathered in the living room after about two hours. Jonathan usually liked to see whoever was present during his fit afterwards, just to make sure he hadn't hurt them. It was a part of the recovery process, along with a nap and ice cream, nobody questioned it anymore. It was a routine they were familiar with to an extent, some more than others.

Will was just starting to doze with his head in Mike's lap and his lower half in Elle's when the stairs creak under two pairs of footsteps. Nobody moves except for quiet shifts, they wait and listen to the sound of the socked feet reaching the ground floor. The TV volume turns down even lower, and Will turns his head to watch Jonathan and Steve come into the room from the foyer.

Jonathan is wearing his signature sunglasses, his hair a tangled mess and his shoulders hunched slightly with his arms crossed. He always looked so small to Will since he had come home. Will had shot up like a beanstalk and Jonathan had stayed the same height, but the older Byers had a tendency to slouch and hunch so it made him look even shorter. This effect of his, trying to make himself seem invisible, had only worsened after his capture. His regular height was

a factor as well, he supposed. Will was still smaller than Elle, Mike, and Lucas, but he was just an inch or two away from looking at the top of his older brother's head.

"See? Everyone's here." Steve reassures Jonathan quietly, pressing a kiss to his messy hair and rubbing his arms soothingly from behind. Jonathanâ€™s head swivels over the room, all of the kids' reflections glimmering back at them in the frames of the sunglasses. "Isn't that nice, Jonny? Everyone stayed to see if you were okay." He murmurs, and Jonathan expectedly doesn't respond in any sort of way, instead he just turns and starts heading into the kitchen. "Okay then..." Steve sighs, letting him go.

"Need us to stick around?" Dustin asks from his spot in the chair, the footrest of it had been raised and he had been asleep with his cap on his face earlier but now it was resting on his chest.

"I'd appreciate back up, if you guys don't have anywhere to be." Steve admits honestly, and there's a quiet mumble of assent from the teens scattered about the room. "I'm gonna go fix him some ice cream." He says with a jerk of his thumb, stepping out of the room.

Will rolls off of Mike and Elle's laps, crawling around the table to lie down on the carpet in front of Max and Lucas. He makes himself comfortable lying on his stomach with his arms pillowing his head. He listens to Elle and Mike getting up as well, making space for Jonathan and Steve to sit down on the couch if they so pleased. Max makes a soft huff of amusement before her fingers caress Will's hair gently; he smiles into his arms and sighs in content.

"Byers, you're like a cat." Max says quietly, and he kicks his legs up in reply. Elle laughs somewhere behind him before a weight drops

down onto Will's back unceremoniously, crushing him just a little. At first he assumes it's Elle, but the scent of a pine-scented deodorant quickly corrects him. He turns his head and finds Mike snuggling his face against the juncture between the back of Will's head and his back. Will reaches back and sinks his fingers into Mike's curls without hesitation, listening to him give a pleased sigh similar to his own from earlier.

"Dog pile," Max says, and then a body bumps against Will's left side, he turns his head to find Lucas making himself comfortable with a pillow he'd gotten from the couch.

"Hey, Will." The eldest of the teens greets him with a grin as he lies on his back with his arms between his head and a pillow. Max throws her leg over Lucas's waist and then drops down onto his front. Just from his expression, Will can see he's internally panicking.

"I wanna join!" Dustin says just as Elle lies down to Will's right, and then she makes a soft 'oomph' of a noise when Dustin drops down onto her. "Sorry!" He slips off but stays close, one arm wrapped over the girl's stomach and the other resting under his head. They did this sometimes, a closeness that had formed between all of them. They found comfort in being together, and at first Max had found it a little odd but she had grown used to it as well.

"Jeez, you leave for five minutes and the kids turn into contagious cuddlers." Steve's voice says, and Will has to force his head the other way to watch Jonathan and Steve make their way over to the couch and sink down. Jonathan is eating vanilla ice cream from a bowl, head tipped down to stare into the dessert as if it might hold the answers to any questions he might have.

"You're just jealous!" Dustin declares a little loudly and Will winces at the way Jonathan flinches just a little. Steve reaches over and rubs his back; Dustin makes a quiet noise of pain as Elle most likely pinches him. Jonathan stirs his spoon through his ice cream, and then brings it up again to eat another spoonful. Will could remember having a bad day or getting hurt, their mother always had ice cream at the ready to cheer them up. Jonathan always asked for it on his bad days now, and Joyce teared up the first few times he had, knowing for a fact that there were some things that her son could never forget.

Mike is warm against Will's back, and his other friends are at his sides, and he shouldn't be comfortable squished into the floor like this but he is. He loved being in small spaces, being held down, it just made him feel relaxed and safe. From a young child his favorite hiding places were under beds and stuffed in closets, anywhere small and out of the way. Mike was the only one he'd ever confided that to, and perhaps he'd decided to lay on him like this for that very reason.

"How you doing, Jonathan?" Max asks boldly, she was never afraid to talk to him like some of them were at times. Jonathan's expression flickers just a little and his spoon pauses halfway up to his mouth, his head tips up and Will can see the blurry reflection of the dogpile in the black panes of his glasses. He stares for a long time, silent and still, and everyone else is waiting patiently for his answer.

"Ice cream." Jonathan says quietly, and Will feels his chest tighten just a little. There were times when he still had trouble connecting, like he could hear them but the words to respond escaped him. Other times it was like he couldn't hear them at all, it was strange and no amount of exposure to it made Will any more accepting of it. "I-I'm.." Jonathan mutters, and there's a small frown on his face, his mind working hard to find an appropriate response. "I'm okay." He answers finally, his voice soft and hesitant.

"Good to hear, man." Max offers, not missing a beat.

"Finish your ice cream, Jonny." Steve coaxes, and Jonathan ducks his head and eats another spoonful. He leans into Steve without prompting, actively seeking out comfort, and the older boy quickly wraps a firm arm around Jonathan and kisses his cheek. Jonathan gives a congested sniff; his sinuses were probably a little stuffed up from crying so intensely earlier. Will sighs against his arm quietly and tucks his face back into his arms, letting the quiet of the moment soak in along with the comfort of his friends surrounding him.

He couldn't help but think of the nights he used to spend with Jonathan on the couch. When he couldn't get comfortable and Jonathan would tug him across the cushions to lie comfortably on his older brother's chest. They still did it sometimes, and he craved it in that moment, but he'd settle for this right now. He would get Jonathan alone later, maybe in the attic, and they could hug or maybe sit together and listen to music. Something to help Will feel like Jonathan was safe, something to help Jonathan feel normal again, to restore balance to his mind and bring him back from the mental abyss he so often fell in.

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Scully is just sinking down to relax on her motel bed when there's a hurried knock on the door. She's in her robe and fresh from the shower and all she wants is to order a pizza and kick her feet up. However, since starting as Mulder's partner, Scully has not had very many chances to relax. She sighs and stands up, opening the door to reveal none other than the man that irritated her close to insanity and yet she wouldn't trade him for anyone else.

"I got pizza," He says with a grin, and she offers a slow nod before opening the door a little wider. "My mind is racing a mile a minute; I have to know what that machine is." He explains as he steps inside, and she can't help but wonder herself so she simply takes the box of pizza and sinks down onto her bed. Mulder begins his usual pacing, he looks showered, he's redressed into a nice button up and jeans so he looks semi-normal.

"Maybe the kids just built their treehouses around some electric company generator." She offers, and Mulder shoots her a look that she interprets as 'Really, Scully?'.

"Why would the guy attack us with a wrench and take off like that? That's not professional, that's fishy, Scully." Mulder tells her with a wave of his hand, she bites into a piece of hot pizza and he sits down to take his own slice.

"Maybe they've been attacked by Jonathan before." She shrugs, and Mulder rolls his eyes before chomping on his own slice and chewing pensively. "I wonder what he meant by saying we promised." She mutters despite her earlier disproval of Mulder's theories. There were some things that just didn't add up, and she was here to cast doubt just to keep Mulder's feet on the ground. If he could provide substantial evidence, they could crack this case wide open and wrap it all up.

"That Harrington guy seemed pretty peeved with someone; there's gotta be something going on." Mulder insists as he takes a bite from his crust, there's sauce on the corner of his lip that he licks at uncoordinatedly until Scully grabs a tissue out of the box on of her bedside table and hands it to him. "Thank you," He mutters, wiping at

his face quickly.

"He said there wasn't any mystery, they knew who took him." Scully says, playing the conversation back in her mind. She felt guilty for causing such a scene, honestly the people just wanted to be left alone, but there was something off about this town and they had to get to the bottom of it. Mulder wouldn't leave until he found some sort of resolution, and she would follow him anywhere just to keep him safe.

"Who is he anyway? What's his affiliation with the Byers?" Mulder questions, and Scully sighs. She thinks back to the heat of the moment, when Steve had snatched Jonathan up in a protective hold, not just holding him back but trying to keep him safe as well. The way he carried Jonathan like it was second nature, and the intense protectiveness he had for the young man, being a full time caretaker of a boy he just so happened to be friends with? Unlikely.

"I'd say they're together." She blurts suddenly, earning a look from Mulder. "No friend drops their entire life to be a full time caretaker of another friend, it just doesn't happen. Especially with a couple of teenagers." She shakes her head, and Mulder gives her a 'fair enough' expression before popping a pepperoni in his mouth.

"We should talk to the mother next; she seemed to be pretty open about it all after Will's recovery." Mulder explains, and Scully sighs as she contemplates the idea. She stands up to fetch a bottle of water she had packed in the fridge earlier, it was barely chilled but she didn't really care. She cracks open the plastic lid and takes a sip. Joyce Byers would not be happy to hear from them; hopefully she wouldn't slam the door right in their faces.

They didn't mention the story they had been told by the boys Dustin and Lucas, because that in and of itself was certainly confusing. Mulder believed them, of course he did, but Scully couldn't just listen to the word of a couple of teenagers who claimed a giant monster stole their friend. There was something going on, they just had to figure out what it was.

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Mulder stops back by the diner they had visited the day before, talks with Jimmy and Edie, and this time receives no input from any of the other customers like last time. He picks up a newspaper outside in a machine, and notes that it was a lot cheaper than what he's used to. When he pulls out the paper, his stomach does a heavy twist and drop at the sight of the date at the top.

Sunday, May 30th, 1987

He stares at it a long time, thinking about the sight of all of the kids and how there was no way they could still be so young in 1994. He had thrown out a pocket dimension theory earlier, but still, seeing the hard evidence was a lot to take. If they were still in 1987 here, that meant Jonathan had to be twenty and his brother was around sixteen... Of course he had almost begun to accept Scully's idea of a misprint in the files, but now he had evidence. He turns to random woman coming down the sidewalk with a little boy clinging to her right hand.

"Excuse me ma'am, could I ask you a silly question?" He inquires, and she frowns as she slows to a stop in front of him. Her little boy steps closer to her and wraps a tiny fist in her blouse.

"I suppose so." She agrees hesitantly.

"What year is it?" He asks, and she blinks at him like he had just grown a second head. Of course he expected that reaction, but he needed to know. "I know, I know, but just humor me." He placates as best he can, and she offers an uncomfortable chuckle.

"Of course... It's 1987." She tells him with a nod, and he smiles at her.

"Thank you, that'll be all. Have a nice day." He waves feebly and watches them scurry along to get away from him, probably assuming him to be some whacko. He clutches the newspaper tight to his chest and breathes out an excited sigh before turning and hurrying back towards his car.

Scully would never believe it!

3. The Doppelganger

Notes for the Chapter:

> (Hey guys, I know it's been a while but here's the new chapter! I really hope everyone likes it, I had to take some time to rearrange the end because I started going over my usual 10K limit. My editing process changed too, so it's all a mess... I'm not putting indentation anymore because it takes too long to do it manually. Please enjoy!)

"It's stress," Jonathan says as he crouches down next to the couch, where Steve is curled up and feeling slightly ill. He felt like a complete idiot but he was lightheaded and a little nauseous, and Jonathan had made a full recovery from yesterday so Steve had agreed to lie down on the couch instead of making breakfast. It was rare that Steve got sick; his immune system was above average for the most part.

Jonathan had been quite a bit angry at the news of the federal agents snooping about but Steve hadn't said a word about him having checked the locks on the doors three times already this morning. There were some things about Jonathan that were unquestionable, and his intense paranoia wasn't exactly far off the mark. Steve wouldn't have to step in unless he started saying the neighbors were working for 'them' again, and he hoped to God they wouldn't have to have that conversation again for the rest of his life. Jonathan was rather stubborn when it came down to it, and when he was sure of something... Well, there was no budging him.

"It's nothing, I'm fine." Steve assures quietly, and Jonathan gives him quite the look before dropping down from his crouch and onto his knees. He runs a soothing hand along Steve's chest and the other is placed on his forehead, which was most definitely not warm in the slightest! Jonathan got so paternal with Steve sometimes, like he got

with Will and Elle on occasion. It was so ingrained into him; he'd been like that for a long time and Steve was always thankful to know that there were bits of the old Jonathan stained into the new Jonathan like footprints in wet cement that was slowly drying.

"I'll make something," He promises quietly, and Steve is quick to shake his head in disagreement.

"I'm not hungry." He states simply, and Jonathan clicks his tongue at his boyfriend disapprovingly. "I don't feel good; you're not allowed to scold me." Steve defends with an exaggerated pout, earning a quiet chuckle from Jonathan. He feels a little better at the sight of the amused smirk on his boyfriend's face, something he never thought he'd see ever again.

"I'll make soup." He pats Steve's chest, who whines in protest as the younger stands up and starts walking towards the door to the kitchen. "Where's the uh..." He snaps his fingers as he tries to place the word, Steve gives him a moment. Sometimes it took him a second to recall the names of things; he had to at least let him try. "The thing..." Jonathan groans, making a twisting gesture with his hands as he looks to Steve with a pleading expression.

"Can opener," He offers, and Jonathan nods his head. "It's in the drawer with the utensils, probably hidden under the rest of our junk." He mutters, and Jonathan hums before turning around once more and disappearing into the next room. It wasn't that he didn't trust Jonathan to be in the kitchen alone (it was more of a play it by ear kind of thing but he never let Jonathan know that), it was just that he didn't want him to go to the trouble. He always felt ashamed and embarrassed when other people tried to take care of him, even if he did sort of like it in a way.

He listens to Jonathan dig around in the utensil drawer while he watches TV, he supposes he'd just have to get used to it. Jonathan was trying his hardest to be independent nowadays, he'd insist on cleaning up or doing the laundry, anything to take back his life. Steve let him, even if he monitored him closely most of the time. As long as he wasn't trying to operate heavy machinery or use a gun, Steve was mostly in the clear. He just didn't want Jonathan to stress too much, it wasn't good for him. Then again, Steve had been stressing so much about that he'd made *himself* sick. How's that for irony?

But Jonathan was a long ways from being independent, he was forgetful and if it weren't for Steve he wouldn't eat or bathe, let alone do laundry. He needed someone to be there and tell him what was real and what wasn't, it wasn't just a generous idea Steve had because it was necessary for someone to be around. If Jonathan lived on his own, Steve was positive he'd quickly fall into hysterics and would do something that they'd all regret. He just needed a guiding hand, and Steve was glad he had the honor of being the person trusted with his well-being.

Jonathan hadn't done much in the kitchen on his own since his return, he fixed cereal and toast and other simple things. Steve cooked dinner on most occasions, and Jonathan often helped when he could, but he never did anything big. He also got really nervous trusting Jonathan around sharp objects and the stove. His triggers were on a hairpin, they were still feeling everything out, and if showers freaked him out who knew what an open flame might do. Steve just didn't want him to hurt himself somehow, and that reoccurring precaution was also a cause of Jonathan's stubborn insistence that he do those things to prove him wrong.

"Steve," He's snapped from his thoughts to find Jonathan standing in the doorway again, frowning down at the soup label with squinted

eyes.

"Yeah, babe?" He mutters, waiting patiently for his response as he continues to stare down at the soup can intensely.

"It's blurry again," He says quietly, stepping over to the couch and holding out the soup can for Steve to take. He often suffered blurred vision from his vision disorder, along with light sensitivity and frequent headaches. He had days where he couldn't open his eyes unless it was pitch black in a room, but most of the time wearing sunglasses or closing the blinds was fine.

Steve hums and reads the label on the can, and now that he thinks about it, chicken noodle soup does sound kind of good.

"Want me to help you?" He asks as he sits up, and Jonathan immediately presses him back down onto the couch. His hands are firm on Steve's shoulder and he's got that little crease between his eyebrows that his mother has, a symbol of frustration.

"I'm okay, read it." He insists, and Steve nods. If Jonathan thought he could handle this on his own, Steve shouldn't smother him.

"All right." He agrees, looking back down at the can.

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"Okay, Mulder, you've got my attention." Scully had told him when he'd presented the newspaper to her, seeming just the slightest bit shaken by the newspaper and his encounter with the woman on the sidewalk. They'd set upon putting the pocket dimension stuff to the side for now, intent on one thing at a time.

They pull into the driveway of Joyce Byers not long after their conversation at the motel, finding two cars in the driveway. The house is simple and a bit run down, nothing too big or expensive like the house they'd seen the day before. There were brown spots in the grass and the wood of the porch looked old and rickety, and something about it felt eerie. It was like if the house could talk, it could explain it had seen some serious stuff in its days. There are two cars in the driveway, one is a police car, and the other is a more run down looking beige car with dents and scrapes all on it.

As they get out and approach the house, Mulder notes three bikes resting against the porch rails. One is a dark blue with big silver handlebars and its seat raised high, another is dark green and a little smaller with an old card stuck in its spokes, the third is purple with a basket on it. The purple one reminds him of his little sister's in that moment, and it seemed like everything reminded him of Samantha lately.

They climb the rickety porch steps and Mulder reaches out to knock on the door, which had paint chipping off of it. There was some faint noise going on inside, but it falls into a hush just before the door opens. Will Byers is standing before them, the happiness in his expression quickly shuttering off into something more stoic at the sight of them.

"Hello, Will..." Is your mother home?" Scully questions, and Will's grip tightens on the door knob before he glances back inside the

house. He bites his lip as if debating something, then looks back at the agents, observing them with scrutiny.

"You can't scare us," He insists in a hushed tone, there are footsteps walking towards the door.

"We promise that's not-"

"Will, honey, who's at the door?" Will steps back and allows an older woman to pull the door open a little farther. She has a messy head of wavy dark hair, and Mulder can immediately see that this was most likely Joyce Byers, as her sons looked quite a bit like her. "Hello, may I help you?" Her expression grows a little cold at the sight of them, but there's a false cheeriness to her tone.

"We're so sorry to bother you, are you Joyce Byers?" Scully questions and the woman nods curtly. "We're agents Mulder and Scully from the FBI; we would like to speak with you about your previous accusations against the Department of Energy about the disappearances of your sons." She tells the woman simply with a flash of their badges, her jaw clenches a little in reply and she sighs just a little.

"Come into the kitchen," She pulls the door farther open and directs them inside. They both step in with a nod of their heads and polite smiles. There are three kids on the couch, two being Will Byers and Elle Hopper, and the other being one of the other boys from the woods. The boys give the agents wary glares, Will more intense than his counterpart, but Elle seems to be observing them with intrigue. Mulder waves at her hesitantly and her mouth twitches into a small frown before it fizzles away into something more neutral as she waves back.

They step into the kitchen per Joyce's request, the house is indeed a bit run down with nicks and scratches in the door frames, the paint and wallpaper looking faded. But there was still an air of home to it, like it was filled with good memories and love. Mulder's home had never quite felt like this, at least in his memories and even now. It felt empty compared to this, this easy to breathe comfort that poured from the walls and filled the atmosphere entirely. Any sense of eeriness from outside was completely eliminated here.

"You have a lovely home, Mrs. Byers." Mulder compliments with a small smile as Joyce enters behind them. She steps over to the counter and fiddles with the coffee pot.

"It's Hopper," She corrects, and both agents nod apologetically. "Would you like some coffee?" She offers, already pulling out cups and spoons.

"Yes please," Scully nods her head curtly with a small smile, and Mulder nods along with her. They sit down at the kitchen table and Mulder's chair wobbles just a bit, but he thinks the floor might be uneven rather than it just being the chair because scooting it a bit closer to Scully on the left makes it stop.

"Mrs. Hopper, would you mind informing us as to why you think the Department of Energy is behind all of this?" Scully inquires simply as they stir their coffee; Mulder takes a tentative sip of his and finds it to be rather good. The mug he's holding is old and has a chip in the rim, but it has more character than most he supposes.

"Because they are," Joyce tells them simply, still stirring her spoon

easily in her mug with a neutral expression on her face. "You never took an interest in this case before, it was all swept under the rug, why come now?" She asks in reply, and the agents look to one another, Mulder speaks up.

"I only just came across the file; it's been classified as something called an X-File. It's where cases go unexplained and they're just sort of filed away and forgotten, we investigate these cases." Mulder explains to her expertly, he'd seen some shit in his day, and he hoped to convey that to this woman. He would believe her, if she really believed it herself. "We want to understand, we want to help solve this." He promises.

"I don't think you do understand because there's nothing to solve." It sounds similar to what the Harrington boy had told them, how there was no mystery. "Your people took my boys," She snaps, eyes watering in the slightest as she loses her cool for a moment, but then she takes in a deep breath and clears her throat before taking a sip of her coffee. "I was told that my sons were dead, and they both had to find their way home on their own." She murmurs, glaring down at her cup.

"Find their way home from where, Mrs. Hopper?" Scully insists, and the woman shakes her head.

"From where they were taken to, held captive by monsters." Her mouth twists into an angry scowl and she lets go of her mug to rub tense hands together, her fingers fidget with the gold band on her finger that still looked new. "Terrible things they've seen, we've all seen." She tells them with dark eyes staring straight into Mulder, conveying a deep sincerity.

"When you say monsters..." Mulder starts, ignoring the look he receives from Scully. "What do you mean by that?" He asks, and she stares at him for a long time in uncertainty, as if debating on whether or not to be honest. That was what sealed his decision to believe her, she'd been shouting the truth for a long time and nobody believed her, he knew the feeling.

The agents both look up at the sound of the back door opening, and Joyce turns her head to watch an older man step inside. He's wiping his hands off on a rag as he enters, but his movements slow to a stop at the sight of the agents seated at the table. He drops the rag on the counter, glancing from Joyce to the door to the living room, as if tempted to make sure everyone was okay.

"What do you want?" He asks gruffly, leaning a hand on the counter and giving them quite the glare. He's dressed in a pair of jeans and a stained t-shirt, but something about his posture reads cop.

"Are-Are you Jim Hopper?" Mulder asks, and when the man nods in agreement Mulder stands to shake his hand. "I'm agent Fox Mulder, that's my partner Dana Scully; we're here investigating your case." He explains a little eagerly as the man pulls his hand away and crosses his arms.

He's a few inches taller than Mulder, which is pretty rare considering how tall he is, and his expression is rather intimidating. These people didn't trust them at all, and yet Mulder wanted so desperately to gain their trust and get to the bottom of all of this.

"There is no case, it's been handled." Jim tells them seriously, he approaches the kitchen table and rests his hand on Joyce's shoulder. Mulder can see the new golden band on his finger, one matching the

one fitted on Joyce's hand. "We don't need your help." He shoots a glare at Mulder; he has the urge to shout that yes they did!

"Then why isn't the case wrapped up?" Scully questions, and Mulder watches Jim's scruffy jaw clench in annoyance.

"As your people often say, that's classified." He says with a tip of his head, Mulder approaches the table once more and crouches down to look Joyce in the eyes.

"Ma'am, don't you want justice for your sons' suffering?" He asks quietly. The woman delivers a sharp slap to his face without hesitation, and he hears Scully take in a sharp inhale of shock in response. Mulder's been slapped before by grieving mothers or wives who don't like his questions, and he knows it's insensitive but usually it's incentive for them to actively participate in helping the investigation.

"Don't you ever question the love I have for my boys," She sneers at him with a point of her finger, eyes shining with tears once more. "I would go to the ends of the Earth to protect them, and nobody is going to come into my house and step on my family!" She tells him sternly, and he nods as he straightens out. Jim is standing calmly behind his wife, looking vaguely smug, just standing back and watching his wife defend herself. She was obviously a strong woman, not afraid to stand up for herself, and Mulder respected that. He respected people who didn't take anyone else's bull crap, especially his own. It was the reason his favorite person in the world was his partner actually.

"I'm guessing you got that from my stepson." Jim points to the bruise and cut on Mulder's face, he looks proud and amused at the idea.

"We did meet on some odd circumstances." He allows with a small smile of his own, and Joyce seems unamused by the comment.

"He's a fragile boy," Joyce tells him, and Mulder glances over to Scully, whose eyes have widened a fraction in disbelief. It was hard to believe that the young man that had brutally attacked them could be described as fragile. "I wish he could stay here but..." She shakes her head, and Mulder frowns as he steps back to his chair and sits down. He was surprised they weren't being thrown out; Jim seems wary of them but also curious, like he wasn't sure about their purpose.

"His trauma seems to have made him dangerous." Scully says quietly, and the older woman nods with a glance back at her husband. She reaches up to place her hand on the man's which was currently still resting on her shoulder.

"It's not his fault," Jim states gruffly, his eyes holding a frustrated anger that had years to solidify into a bitter acceptance but had not yet reached that point yet somehow.

"Mom, Elle's nose is bleeding again." They all look up to find Will and the other boy standing on opposite sides of the girl between them, her hand cupped over a tissue pressed against her face. Joyce stands up as her husband walks over to the teens shuffling into the kitchen, the woman fetches a paper towel and the agents get to their feet, ready to make a hasty exit.

"I'll walk you out," Will says with a nod to the agents, the two boys follow behind them. They reach the door; Mulder and Scully turn

their heads to look at the teenagers. The taller one is still glaring at them, his arm around Will's shoulders with a protective and strong posture, as if he was ready to fight. Will had his arms crossed, frowning just slightly, he looked like he was thinking about something rather intensely.

"We're sorry to have bothered you," Scully apologizes politely, but neither of the teens accept it nor forgive them in any way.

"The others aren't like you." Will offers suddenly, and Mulder blinks at him in surprise.

"The others?" Scully repeats slowly in confusion, and Will nods.

"They're after us," Will says, his voice hoarse and his shoulders tense under the arm of the boy next to him. "We don't talk about it a lot, but everyone's scared... We can't let our guard down or trust people, especially strangers." He explains quietly, the taller boy is giving him a curious look, like he's worried or something to that effect.

"These people, Will... Are they the ones that kidnapped you?" Scully asks, stepping just a little closer. Will shakes his head slowly, swallowing roughly and glancing away uncomfortably.

"They were part of it, but they didn't take me." He shrugs his shoulders and the taller boy next to him pulls him a little closer, Will wraps his arm around the boy's waist. For a moment Mulder watches their eyes meet, and he thinks that he might see something there, but he can't be too sure. He wasn't very good at spotting interest for some reason; he would have never guessed Jonathan and Steve to have

been together if it weren't for Scully pointing it out.

"The Demogorgon did." Mulder finishes for him, and Will's gaze snaps up to meet the older man's. There's no humor, no relief, just cold fear hidden in his gaze. He seems to grow a little older at the name, like the simple mention of it aged him. His eyes are a bit distant, like he's being brought back to whatever happened in those few days. The boy's tongue flicks over his lip before he shifts anxiously, looking away once more.

"My brother killed it," He says quietly, voice low and shaking. "He killed the Demogorgon and then we tried to kill the thing that killed our dad. We stepped in too deep, and those people tried to take us as punishment." He steps forward out of the other boy's embrace, looking up at Mulder with a stoic expression. "And my brother saved me again, and they took him instead." He whispers, tears glazing over his eyes and his voice cracking just the slightest.

"Who are they?" Mulder asks quietly, and Will shakes his head.

"We don't know," He mutters, stepping back and looking away once more. "But I'll spend every day for the rest of my life regretting being saved, because it cost Jonathan more than you'll ever understand, Mr. Mulder." He says softly, crossing his arms in a tight self-hug and a tear dripping down his face before he can wipe at it properly. Will turns away and pushes past the taller boy in the doorway, disappearing inside and leaving them in quiet.

"We want justice for Will and his family," Mulder tells the boy before him, he looks less angry now, but no less guarded.

"There is no justice." He shakes his head, reaching up and gripping the doorframe. "I'd watch your backs, if you're really not with them. They'll come for you, FBI or not, good person or bad. They show no mercy, and they will take everything away from you the second they have the chance." He promises them sincerely before taking a step back and shutting the door.

Mulder and Scully look to each other, baffled, before slowly descending the porch steps and heading back to the car. They get in without a word, still processing the information that had both been provided and yet kept from them. Everything was a mess of heated words and speeches and the purposes and origins of these stories had yet to be presented to them. It was like they were in a world where everyone knew what was going on but them, but Mulder supposed that was what most cases were like.

"These people are terrified, Mulder." Scully says as they pull out of the driveway, Mulder nods his head as he turns the wheel, still mulling over the conversation. How could they do anything if this mysterious organization was practically in the wind? "We should check out the Department of Energy." Scully tells him, and he hums his agreement. At least Scully wasn't offering much resistance on this one. They both knew something was up; it was just going to take a lot to get to the bottom of it.

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"What does fed stand for again?" Jonathan asks quietly as the infomercial on the TV plays. Jonathan had made himself some toaster waffles and Steve some soup, but Steve had stolen a few bites of his waffles, which he didn't regret even if it made him feel a little sick after. He'd been resting comfortably on Jonathan's chest for the past half hour while they watched TV. He enjoyed listening to Jonathan

hum to TV show theme songs and the feeling of his chest rising and falling beneath him.

"Federal agent, like the FBI, Federal Bureau of Investigation." He explains quietly, and Jonathan makes a quiet noise of understanding. He feels Jonathan's left arm twitch where it's trapped under Steve and the couch cushion, probably itching to scratch and tear at skin. He was wearing a short sleeve shirt at the moment, so Steve was glad he was on top of him, keeping him from acting on his urges.

"Do you think it's them?" Jonathan inquires carefully, and Steve purses his lips as he debates this answer. The people in that dastardly organization were conniving and sly, he wouldn't put it past them to pull something like this. But at the same time, what would be the point? They had them right where they wanted them, didn't they?

"Do you?" He asks instead, and Jonathan shifts under him a little.

"Nothing is real, ever." He says in a hushed tone, and Steve nods his head. Jonathan often talked about the realness of everything, as if he might be woken up from reality to find it had been a dream. If he ever got confused, it was absolutely heartbreaking to see him try to puzzle out whether it was a hallucination of sorts. From what he could tell, the drugs he'd been repeatedly dosed with over the years had put him through awful hallucinations and delusions. He still had moments where he didn't know where he was and what was going on, told everyone they weren't real and curled up in a ball. Clarity was fluid with Jonathan; it came and went in different levels of intensity.

"I'm real." He reminds Jonathan quietly, who makes a noise that tells Steve he's not quite sure if that's the truth but he doesn't want to

argue. He might live a constant life nowadays with routine and familiar things, but his doubts were almost always present. Sometimes he believed Steve, sometimes he didn't, and it depended on how much he trusted his clarity that day. "I am." He promises, tilting his head to look him in the eyes and reaching up to stroke his cheek.

Jonathan smiles at him gently, his eyes still holding a sort of disbelief, but he leans his head off of the pillow it's resting on in a silent request for a kiss. Steve complies, pressing their lips together in a syrup-flavored kiss that has them both smiling when they pull away.

"M'sorry." Jonathan mutters, eyebrows scrunching together, and Steve kisses him once more. Jonathan apologized a lot, for many different reasons, some unknown. Steve hated the words coming from him, so guilty and unsure but certain that he had something to apologize for.

"I love you." He says, instead of scolding him. Jonathan's lips twitch upwards and he gets that sweet look on his face that Steve loved so much, especially when it was directed at him.

"You too." He agrees, dropping his head back against his pillow and wrapping his free hand around Steve's back. Steve adjusts his head on Jonathan's chest once more and sighs with content, the FBI could go fuck themselves, he was having a nice day with his boyfriend.

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The Department of Energy is a complete dead end, considering the

fact that the entire building is shut down and condemned. It takes them twenty minutes to find the building which apparently had been moved at one point and is on the other side of town. The parking lot is empty, the doors are boarded up and the gates are chained shut. There are weeds sprouting up through cracks in the pavement and the grass around the toll booth is so overgrown it looks to be past knee height. The facility is so close to the woods that it looks like something out of a horror movie; it's disappointing to say the least but something tells Mulder that even if it weren't abandoned they would receive no information.

However, Fox Mulder was not called crazy for nothing... So within a few seconds of being parked and Scully sighing as she suggested they find a better lead, he's pulling a flashlight from the glove box, getting out of the car and walking up to the fence. He starts to scan the expanse of metal wiring, looking for any weak spots.

"Mulder, what do you think you're doing?" Scully demands as she gets out of the car, standing at her door with an impatient look on her face.

"C'mon Scully," He urges as he finds a carefully concealed disconnect of the wire from the pole, pulling the metal back and crouching down. "Where's your sense of adventure?" He teases as he glances back at his partner, the woman gives him a look but then again that's pretty much her constant expression towards him when he's talking.

"I left it back at the motel," She deadpans, earning a raucous laugh from her partner as he squeezes through the small opening on his hands and knees. "Mulder, that's breaking and entering." She reminds him as he stands up on the other side, dusting off his dirty knees and smiling with triumph.

"What did I break, Scully?" He questions with a wide gesture of his arms, the woman rolls her eyes as she approaches. She plants her hands on her hips in that powerful stance that somehow commanded attention and yet forbade anyone from not taking her seriously. Mulder was most likely the only person in the world that disobeyed anything she said, it made him more than a little smug.

"Fine then, trespassing." Scully concedes, but Mulder simply continues to smile at her, disallowing any attempts at persuading him to turn back.

"Nobody's here, Scully!" Mulder turns his back to her, starts walking towards the facility building. He won't look back, because he knows for a fact that she'd come after him, she was the only one brave enough to follow 'Spooky' Mulder into the dark.

The front doors are boarded up so Mulder goes around, seeking out any vulnerable point in the building where he could find entrance. Scully is walking a few feet behind him, quiet and a little annoyed with him, but doing her own silent observation of the facility. Scully relied on Mulder to do the illegal or unethical things, the things they both knew she wanted to do but was bound by her morals to follow. However, Mulder's views of things like this were a bit of a gray area. People had died, children were traumatized, and someone was behind it. Mulder called that probable cause in his own terms; anything anyone else said was bullshit.

They work their way around the building, until they reach a ladder that leads up onto the roof. Mulder debates continuing around in search for another entrance, but Scully is already climbing up the ladder before he can make a decision. He follows his partner up the

metal steps onto the flat rooftop, almost tripping on the last step but recovering quickly. Sometimes his long limbs were hard to control, and even though FBI training was a bitch because of it, it had also helped him a little.

There isn't much up there but vents and rocks strewn out as gravel along the ground, but the vantage point shows them the wide expanse of trees that stretches outwards. The facility isn't small in the slightest, so they have to walk a little ways just to make sure there aren't any hidden access points behind some of the larger vents.

Mulder pauses and stares out at the trees beyond, scanning the edge of the fence and wondering how many people had trespassed before them. The facility didn't have any graffiti on it, and it showed no evidence of vandalism, which was odd. Any group of young thugs could see this was most definitely open season for breaking things and defacing property without getting caught.

"Over here, Mulder."

He turns at the voice, following the sight of Scully's bright red hair over to a large vent and on the other side of which is a large hatch door. It has an old rusty latch on it with a small padlock; Scully has a metal bar in her hand, which she thrusts against the lock with a quiet grunt. The rusted metal breaks away, and Mulder leans forward to grab the handle and wrench the hatch open.

"Jackpot," He grins over at his partner, who offers him an expression of fond exasperation.

There's a musty smell that wafts from inside, and a few cobwebs are attached to the underside of the latch. Mulder pulls his flashlight from his pocket, switching it on and shining it down below. There's another ladder, and the floor below seems to be littered with trash, but relatively safe to descend down into.

Mulder takes the lead, heading down and shining his light around the room they drop down into. He lets go of the railing and steps down, he scans the floor which has scattered debris all along it. He peers around and finds that while the place is abandoned, it seemed to have never been properly emptied as there are a few chairs and file cabinets left.

"How endearing," Scully deadpans as she gently toes at a wad of paper on the floor with her shoe.

"Someone's overdue for a spring cleaning," Mulder mutters, heading towards the door as Scully steps across the room to look in the file cabinets. He hears them squeak and slide open, a few different drawers after in quick succession which inform him of the answer to his next question. "Anything?" He hums, leaning out into the hallway. The light is a little more prominent in the hall, where there are a few windows.

"Not a thing, figures." Scully steps out behind him and he turns one way and then another to scan the hallway with his flashlight beam. "It's odd that this place cleared out so quickly, isn't it? Department of Energy," She says quietly, and Mulder nods his head.

"Very strange," He agrees, spotting a large metal door at the very end of the hallway. "Let's go poke at things with sticks until we get what we want." He jokes, earning a small swat on the shoulder before he

sets into motion, heading over to the door.

As they reach the door he peers left and right, finding another two hallways on either side of them. However, nothing really sticks out to him or seems to be of any interest so he reaches out to touch the door. The metal is cool on his palm, and he quickly realizes it's very heavy as he has to exert quite a bit of force to get it to swing open. He shines his flashlight inside when he notes that the room has no visible windows, and he freezes up when he sees something a dark color dried on the tiles.

"Scully, do you see that?" He says, leaning to the side so the woman can look past him.

"Is that blood?" They both step inside and the musty smell grows a little stronger, like an animal was kept in here for a long period of time.

He only scans the floor for a moment when he notes that Scully has a small light of her own, then spins in a slow circle to look for anything else in the room. He stops on a small cot in the corner of the room, the mattress has tears and springs are jutting from the fabric, but the most noticeable thing is that there are leather restraints built onto it.

"Mulder, take a look at this." He turns to look at Scully, whose small light is focused on the wall now. The wall is tiled just as the floors are, unlike the other room and hallway, but the marks on the walls aren't anything like the scuffs on the floor. There are small cracks that look like impact marks, blood splatters, bloody handprints and fingerprints.

"Jesus," Mulder whispers, taking a step closer and feeling sick to his stomach. It looked like someone had been stuck in here, for God knows how long, trying to claw their way out until they inflicted damage onto themselves.

"Mulder, someone was being held captive in here." Scully says with concern, and he can't help but think of Steve Harrington and Joyce Byer's earlier words.

" We know who took him; there is no mystery,"

" -held captive by monsters."

He turns his flashlight to the ceiling, finds a couple of large industrial bulbs fitted into the ceiling, but he notes that there's no inside light switches. Mulder also realizes that there are two speakers built into the ceiling as well, and wonders what sort of unimaginable things took place here.

"You shouldn't be here," A voice sings from outside in the hallway, Mulder jumps and he hears Scully gasp quietly. They both look at each other, startled, and then they're both reaching for their guns.

"Who's out there?" Scully demands, holding her firearm at the ready as they slowly exit the room. They each scan to their left and their right, but they both turn to look down the main hallway ahead when a soft laugh echoes from that area. A figure steps out from one of the rooms, right into a shadowy area.

"I see you saw our room," It's a young man, with a raspy sort of voice

that sounds vaguely familiar. "Awful, isn't it?" He questions, leaning against the wall casually and obscuring himself more into the darkness.

"Your room? You were the one living in that?" Scully questions as they stand their ground, weapons aimed steadily.

"We didn't live in there; we just stayed in there a lot..." Mulder falters just a little, lowering his gun slowly as he takes a step forward.

"Who's we?" He inquires, and the voice laughs, it sounds twisted and off.

"Nobody important, Agent Mulder." He says, and Scully steps forward as well, not dropping her gun yet.

"I order you to step out into the light and identify yourself." She says cautiously, and the young man snickers quietly before complying. He takes one step, then another, and then there's a familiar face standing not but ten feet away from them.

"Jonathan," Mulder breathes, feeling his skin prickle with unease, something wasn't right. Jonathan's dressed in a pair of sweatpants and a loose t-shirt with no shoes on, and there's something about his eyes that are more than a little unnerving. They're dark and barely glinting in the light, like black orbs that are trained steadily on them.

"They called me Twenty-Four; actually they tattooed it on this arm."

He holds up his right arm, waving a steady hand and smiling darkly. "It got cut off in one of many suicide attempts." He admits casually, and Mulder suddenly has an odd feeling in his chest.

"Who are you?" He asks, and Jonathan- not Jonathan, this definitely wasn't him- laughs once more.

"You're smarter than you look, agent." He says with a wave of his hand, and then crosses his arms before leaning back just a little. His hair looks matted down, like he'd run his hands over it repeatedly until it had stayed there.

"You shouldn't be here, Jonathan." Scully says, her weapon lowering in the slightest.

"Neither should you, this case is closed." Jonathan tells them firmly, and Mulder squints his eyes as the young man tilts his weight onto his left leg, could have sworn for a moment that the boy looked like a mirage of sorts.

"For someone with brain damage and severe trauma, you sure as hell seem fine." Mulder says, earning a look from Scully out of the corner of his eye. Jonathan falters just a little, blinks a few times and then clears his throat. It almost seems as if he loses his balance, leaning against the wall with a hand and ducking his head a little.

"Leave Hawkins, you're going to get everyone hurt." Jonathan insists quietly.

"Why's that?" Scully asks, and Jonathan looks up once more, meeting the woman's eyes and tilting his head a little bit.

"There are deals in place that shouldn't be messed with, Jonathan or someone he loves could die." The young man snaps heatedly, and Mulder offers a wry smirk.

"I thought you were Jonathan," He says, and watches the young man's face turn into an intense scowl. He doesn't look right, Mulder had only met Jonathan briefly but this wasn't him. This was someone pretending to be him, someone or something...

"I have to go," He steps back, and the agents start to move forward at once just as he turns and races into a room.

"Jonathan!" They enter the room, which is small and empty, with no visible way out. Scully spins around in the middle of the room, searching for any sign of the young man, Mulder standing in the doorway with his mind racing.

"We need to get back to the Harrington residence," Mulder says quietly, and Scully turns to look at him incredulously.

"That young man is mentally unfit; we can"t just leave him out here, Mulder." She insists, and Mulder rubs a hand over his face. Sometimes Scully's lack of imagination created a barrier miles wide between them, she couldn't ever entertain the idea that sometimes things weren't always explainable.

"Scully, I really don't think we'll be able to find him." He says simply, and she sighs as she holsters her gun. "We'll be better off checking in with Steve Harrington and seeing if he knows where Jonathan is and helping organize a search if need be." He explains, and she nods slowly.

"All right,"

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Jonathan knows what his different episodes feel like, and what they do to his mind and body.

He knows what it's like to have his mind empty out completely until all he knows is familiar faces and if he's lucky, a few names. He knows how sometimes his body aches and burns with phantom pains and he can't help but scratch at the affected area until it stops, sometimes until the skin breaks or Steve has to pin his arms down and talk to him like an upset child until he stops crying out of sheer panic.

He knows how it feels to remember so vividly what his captors looked like, to be mentally put back in *that place*. He knows what it's like to lose himself and come back to find that his throat is raw from screaming and his body aches from putting up such a fight, to look at his friends and family who are worried but afraid... Afraid of him... Sometimes if it's bad enough they'll be bloody, have wounds and injuries that his unseeing but violent body gave them, those are the times when he's afraid of himself even more than they are of him.

He knows what it's like to have a seizure and to wake up feeling like he's been shoved in a dryer, to throw up on himself and have awful vertigo for an hour afterwards. He even knows what it's like to have a migraine so intense that he's crippled from pain, to have sobs wrenched from him and trembles wrack his body. Jonathan has seen it all, but this is something else.

Steve had fallen asleep on him but after a while Jonathan had started to feel nauseous, it happened sometimes. When his mind turned with disgusting images and memories of pain resurfaced, but this was different. He'd gotten up, hoping that maybe something to drink would help, or maybe he could walk it off. He'd only gotten to the doorway before he'd stumbled into the facing and clutched onto it for dear life.

Flash, flash, flash.

Bright lights, making his eyes burn like they do when he goes out in the sun without his glasses... He sees images, pictures he doesn't remember from his time with his captors. He sees two people, blurry figures at the end of a hallway and the echoes of voices ring in his ears. He feels sick, he feels weak and he hates it but he's scared.

"Jonny?" Steve's voice sounds like it's far away, and maybe Jonathan is going somewhere far away, but he doesn't like the idea of that. He vaguely feels his knees hitting the kitchen tile and his body slamming down onto the floor shortly after, there's a vague calling of his name that doesn't sound like anyone he knows and then everything is gone.

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Steve can feel his heart in his throat as he watches Jonathan's body jerk and convulse, it wasn't the first time this had happened but it scared the hell out of him every damn time. He had fallen so hard, Steve should have gotten to him quicker but he'd been sort of asleep when Jonathan had gotten up. He'd only noticed something was wrong when Jonathan had slammed into the facing of the doorway to the kitchen.

He had been having seizures since he'd gotten home, this would be the eighth one now, and the doctor said that despite the concern he had over it he really had no way to explain it either. Jonathan was never harmed, they never lasted for extremely long, and he would just wake up confused and upset afterwards.

It feels like a lifetime but Steve's been watching his watch and they're just pushing over a minute when Jonathan's body starts to slow in its convulsions, falling limp after a couple extra seconds. Steve lets out a relieved breath, slowly lowering Jonathan's head from where he'd been holding it up off of the kitchen floor to keep him from slamming it against the tile.

He turns Jonathan over onto his side, into the position that the doctor had taught him for future reference after his second seizure. Steve threads his fingers through Jonathan's hair and combs through it gently, waiting for him to wake up. His ass is starting to hurt from sitting on the tile when Jonathan starts to stir, moaning quietly and his limbs starting to attempt to shift out of place.

"Shh, you're okay," He murmurs, keeping Jonathan in place with a hand on his shoulder.

"Nngh, ow..." He groans, moving a clumsy hand to claw at the tile.

Steve reaches out and takes his hand, squeezing it gently and rubbing his free hand over Jonathan's side.

"Take a minute, Jonny." He says quietly, feeling Jonathan's fingers spasm in his grip just a little. "You had a seizure, just take it easy." He sighs, and Jonathan moans again but has either vied to listen to Steve or he's just too out of it to actually move again just yet.

Steve sits with Jonathan for quite a while, counts the minutes and feels more and more relieved by the minute that he wasn't relapsing into another seizure. It had happened before, so he wasn't taking any chances by moving Jonathan just yet. He waits until Jonathan is staring blearily up at him and reaching out with his free hand, Steve smiles at him softly and carefully pulls the young man into his lap.

"Everything okay? You didn't hurt yourself too bad?" He asks quietly, Jonathan shakes his head and then pulls his hand up to rub at his cheek, which was already starting to bruise from the rough impact of the floor. "Don't touch it, you'll make it hurt worse." He scolds halfheartedly, earning a soft sigh from his boyfriend. They sit for another few minutes, until Jonathan is less dazed and more tired.

"Let's get you back on the couch, yeah?" He runs his fingers over Jonathan's bangs and pushes them back away from his forehead. He gets Jonathan firmly in his arms before slowly getting onto his knees and pushing himself to his feet, carrying the young man back into the living room.

Steve would probably have to call the doctor, even though they were without an exact cause at the moment, it just seemed like they needn't give up. Jonathan hated the hospital, hated doctors and nurses to the point where he wouldn't step foot inside the building

unless he was on hardcore anxiety medication or given a sedative.

The stuff that had been prescribed was strong enough that it made Jonathan very calm and pliant, but it also made him less of himself. Jonathan had been changed drastically during his disappearance, but he still held a lot of lively qualities and personality traits that were definitely his. The medication made him more of a quiet hollow shell than Steve had ever seen, so it had to be an emergency when they gave it to him.

He didn't want to have to give Jonathan that medication to get him to go to the hospital, but he'd talk it over with the doctor and plan out the next steps. Steve could not stand by and risk Jonathan falling even more ill, not without at least trying to find some way to fix it. But right now Jonathan just needed rest, so Steve would let him do that, maybe get some food into him in a little while.

"S-Some..." Jonathan starts, he always struggled to speak after a seizure, his brain trying to recover from the malfunction.

"What's that?" He sits down next to the couch, lets Jonathan reach over and take his hand clumsily.

"Something hap-happened." He mumbles, blinking as his gaze turns to the ceiling.

"Yeah, you had a seizure." Steve tells him patiently, but Jonathan quickly nods before lifting up his head and looking around.

"A man... A-And a woman." He glances around the room as if looking for any hidden people out of his line of sight, Steve frowns in confusion. Maybe it was a memory, or some form of hallucination... Steve was the only one in the house, but he felt frustrated at the fact that he couldn't get inside Jonathan's head.

"It's just me here, pretty boy." He assures, and Jonathan grimaces in response and reaches up to shakily rub at his eye.

"Tall... n'short..." Jonathan mumbles incoherently, and Steve has a brief moment of worry that he might be going into a different form of seizure. Nancy had researched all sorts of seizures after Jonathan's first, and Steve knew the signs of one of them were that the person would start talking crazy kinda like they might be talking in their sleep.

"What, baby?" He asks gently, just a little afraid and sadder than anything else. But Jonathan looks up at him, makes direct eye contact, and smiles just a little.

"See-Seizure dream... err somethin..." He mumbles, and Steve feels a tiny bit of relief flood him, like the first hit of a joint starting to take effect. "M'tired." He reaches out just a little and pulls on Steve's hand, so the older boy pushes Jonathan's upper body up and slides his way under him. He helps the young man turn over and recline against him on his stomach, a reversal of their earlier positioning.

Steve sets to humming softly under his breath, a way to soothe the both of them that they were fond of. Steve sang and hummed and made up little songs just for the heck of it, and Jonathan often fell asleep listening to his tunes, no matter how awful they were.

"Jonny-boy, you know how much I love you?" He questions softly, earning a tired inquiry of a noise in response as Jonathan's head shifts on his chest. "More than air, Jonathan, I'd die without you." He promises as he combs his fingers through Jonathan's hair. He smiles as the hand resting on his shoulder squeezes down on him just a little, exhausted but intent on making sure that his affections are known.

He falls quiet, stares up at the ceiling as Jonathan drifts off into a drained sleep. It seemed like all Jonathan did was sleep sometimes, always trying to refuel the energy that was endlessly sucked from his body from the many things that plagued him... But it didn't matter, because Steve would keep a silent vigil over him until he awoke. He would spend the rest of his life brushing his soft hair and rubbing his back just to occupy himself and make sure that even in sleep Jonathan would know he wasn't alone.

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The view of the Harrington residence from the front is a little less luxurious than that of the back yard. The beautiful white paneling has been relentlessly ruined by what appears to be different sticky substances including eggs as evidence of the broken shells on the porch. The windows have bars on them, most likely to protect its residents, and there is spray paint everywhere.

The words ***Faggots*** and ***Murderer*** are the most prominent, in bright red letters. Scully can't help but feel disgusted by the state of the house at just the first glance, but closer inspection just adds onto it. The porch railings have been broken, the mail box is gone, and the front door has noticeable marks on it from what Scully perceives to

be an attempt at breaking and entering.

They walk up to the door quietly, and Scully shares a glance with Mulder that tells her he's thinking something similar to her. The people in town loathed Jonathan Byers and by association Steve Harrington and anyone else involved with the young man. It was terrifying to be honest, to see what small minded people could do. She takes in a deep breath as they stop in front of the door, noting that the door has not two but four deadlocks on it.

"Something tells me they're not really expecting the neighbors over for tea." Mulder mutters after he knocks on the door, there's quiet for a long time and movement in the curtains of the window to the left of the door.

They stand silently as the locks on the door slowly click open, and then the door knob twists and there's the moving of what sounds like a door chain. The door slides open farther open and Steve Harrington is standing before them, a bat in his right hand that seems to be covered in nails. He lifts an eyebrow at them, appearing tired and annoyed at their presence.

"We're sorry to bother you again, but we were wondering if you knew where Jonathan was." Mulder questions immediately and Steve's eyebrows scrunch together as he observes Mulder like he'd just spoken gibberish.

"He's here, why, is someone accusing him of something?" His eyes light up in a fire of rage, jaw shifting just a bit as he clenches his teeth together.

"How long has he been here?" Scully inquires curiously, wondering just how much Steve really watched Jonathan. They had just seen him down at the facility, but how could he have made it back on foot in the twenty five minutes it took them to get back to the house. He must have some form of transportation, unless Steve is lying to cover for him.

"He's been with me almost every minute of every day for the past few months, he's rarely out of my sight and when he's not with me he is with the kids or his mother. He has been in this house for the past two days, I can promise you that." He explains quietly, and Mulder glances over at Scully in the corner of her eye, but her mind is whirring with the implications of Steve lying to keep Jonathan safe. What if he had committed all of those crimes people were accusing him of?

"You were with him, you had him in your sight thirty minutes ago?" Mulder asks insistently, and Steve rolls his eyes.

"I haven't taken my eyes off of him in the last half hour, he had a seizure if you must know." He snaps, and Mulder's face does something complicated before he reaches over and touches Scully like an excited child. She smacks his hand away and Steve looks between them like they've lost their minds. "Are we done here?" He asks.

"Does Jonathan have any other siblings? A brother maybe, closer to his age?" Scully asks, and Steve scowls at her, slowly shaking his head.

"A clone, maybe." Mulder whispers under his breath, and Steve rubs a hand over his face while Scully shoves at Mulder.

"What the hell is this about?" Steve demands angrily, impatient as he grips a hand on the door, ready to shut it in their faces.

"We were just having a conversation with what appeared to be Jonathan Byers not thirty minutes ago down at the Department of Energy building across town." Mulder eagerly replies, and Steve's face shifts not into disbelief, but into something akin to fear. "Would you have any idea how something like that might occur?" He asks, and Steve steps back from the door.

"Jonathan doesn't talk to strangers," He murmurs, unsure and a little distracted. "He barely talks at all to anyone but me." Steve jumps suddenly and turns a little, revealing Jonathan himself standing two feet behind him, warily gazing out at the agents at the door and keeping his distance at the same time.

Jonathan stares at them with dark eyes, although Scully has to admit he seems to give off a different vibe than earlier. The Jonathan they had met earlier had a bit more confidence to his step, almost a conniving air around him, and this guy looked like you could startle him just by speaking. Multiple personality disorder, maybe, and she wasn't crossing out some sort of twin that nobody knew about either just yet. She acknowledges his clothes are different, but at the same time he could have changed at some point so the idea of using it as evidence was moot.

"Jonny, you scared me, dude." Steve says quietly, reaching out gently and touching his shoulder in a simple caress.

"Hello Jonathan," Scully waves her hand hesitantly, Jonathan blinks

at her as if she hadn't said anything at all.

The young man peers out past them, onto the street, and then raises a scarred hand up to wave them inside. Steve seems shocked, but he lets the agents inside and then locks the door behind them. Jonathan leads the agents into the next room, a large living room with quite a few seats.

"Jonathan, do you mind if we ask you some questions?" Scully inquires, standing before the young man that was cautiously peering out the window as if expecting the SWAT team to come crashing inside. He doesn't make any move to respond, or show any acknowledgment for her speaking. Once again, it was a lot different from that of the person they had come across at the facility. The mention of a seizure was interesting, it allotted right when they were talking to the person at the facility so it could just be a cover up. Jonathan didn't look to be recovering from a seizure, he seemed a little tired but seizures took quite a lot out of people for a good while after and he appeared to be getting on well. However, there was a suspicious dark mark on his cheek that might be a result from hitting the floor during a seizure.

"He's sensitive," Steve speaks up from his spot on the couch, tone firm and to the point. "He doesn't do well with questions." He insists, his eyes scrolling over to where Jonathan was standing.

Scully watches him itch at his arm idly, fingernails digging in hard with every scratch. She remembers Steve's words from just the other day, about how he suffered from excoriation, and from the scars all over him it seemed to be quite a severe case of it.

"Jonathan," Steve calls out tersely, and the younger turns his head a

little. "C'mere." He waves him over, and Jonathan listens easily. He steps over to the couch and sinks down next to Steve, their sides pressed together. Steve takes hold of Jonathan's arm and observes it a moment, probably for broken skin, and then settles it down in Jonathan's lap.

"Do you want to talk to them?" He questions simply with a nod of his head in the direction of the agents standing on the other side of the coffee table. Jonathan stares at him for a moment and Scully sort of has the feeling that Steve might just be speaking to someone that has no idea what's going on. But Jonathan nods his head after a moment, and then peers over at Scully in particular.

"You ask," He says hoarsely, like his voice hadn't been used in a little while.

"All right, then." Scully agrees awkwardly, watching as Mulder smirks at her and sinks into a chair across the room, observing everything around him casually. Steve points her to sit on the couch next to Jonathan, there's a good amount of space so she makes sure to create a little bit of a gap between herself and the young man.

"Jonny, look at me." Steve murmurs, and Jonathan does so, fingers twitching in his lap. "If you get scared or upset and you want to stop, we'll stop." He promises, and Jonathan hums under his breath and then turns his eyes back to Scully.

"That's right, if you want to stop that's fine. How about if you don't want to answer a question, you just shake your head, all right?" She asks, and Jonathan nods his head slowly in agreement, leaning back against Steve's chest when the older man adjusts himself. She had to approach this carefully, if there was one thing she believed it was

that Jonathan had a short fuse. A wrong question might set him off, and they really needed answers at this point, this was their best bet...

4. The Return of an Old Friend

Notes for the Chapter:

> (Hey everyone, it's been quite a while, hasn't it? Well, here we are again. I've decided to shorten the chapters, it makes it easier to write if I have easily attainable goals! I hope you like it.)

Up close, Jonathan's scars are a lot more horrifying to look at. They're plainly visible in his short sleeve shirt, endless amounts of marred skin. She knows that if he didn't have a shirt on at all, he'd have a T shaped scar on his chest, like the one morticians made on dead bodies for autopsies. That was one of the most terrifying things too. Not all of this was something he'd done to himself; it had been done to him unwillingly and by force. He'd been cut open by unknowns, and she found herself not wanting to know any details to be honest, but they had to get somewhere on this case.

"Jonathan can you tell me about the day you went missing?" She asks quietly, and the young man seems to ponder this question as if he wasn't sure if he could.

"I got shot," Jonathan says as he brings his hand up to brush at a certain part of the middle of his chest.

"Who shot you, Jonathan?" She asks, glancing back at Steve to gauge his reaction. He seems almost dazed in that moment, like he was remembering it himself. She looks back to Jonathan when he shrugs his shoulders, she leans back against the arm of the couch and thinks for a moment. "Was there anyone around that you knew?" She questions, and he takes a moment to think once more.

“Steve,” He murmurs, his fingers brushing the arm slung around his waist. “Eleven,” He says, and Scully frowns as Steve seems to tense up.

“Elle, Jonathan.” He murmurs, and Jonathan blinks a few times before nodding. A slip of the tongue perhaps (In Jonathan’s case, a slip of the mind), but something about Steve’s reaction didn’t seem to implicate that.

“Elle, Steve, Will, and Nancy.” He lists with a nod of his head, and when Scully looks to Steve for confirmation, he nods. “Didn’t hurt, just scared.” Jonathan says, almost like a promise as he glances back at Steve. Steve nods his head sullenly and presses a gentle kiss to Jonathan’s cheek, Scully looks over at Mulder just to get her ‘told you so’ look directed at him.

“Why’d you get shot, Jonathan?” She decides to inquire, earning a soft noncommittal noise in reply. “You don’t know?” She asks, and Jonathan shrugs.

“I broke the deal,” He whispers, picking at a loose string in his sweatpants.

“This deal you keep talking about, deal with who?” Mulder adds in suddenly, Steve shakes his head immediately.

“We could get killed just talking to you guys,” He says suddenly, looking more stressed than Jonathan has so far. “These people don’t play around, all right?” He snaps, and Scully watches Jonathan flinch just a little at presumably the volume of his voice.

“Aces up their sleeves,” Jonathan shows the first bit of emotion since their arrival, he seems angry almost, but frustrated too. Aces up their sleeves; what the hell did that even mean… What that they didn’t play fair? It was obvious to say the least, from the state of the Byers family.

“Don’t even start with that, you sound like Will…” Steve grunts, dropping his face into his hands with a groan.

“Will is smart,” Jonathan insists with a push against Steve’s shoulder with his hand. He wasn’t rough in the slightest, Scully couldn’t even fathom this soft-spoken and fragile looking young man was the one that had tackled Mulder like a linebacker.

“Jonathan, go upstairs and take a nap or something, all right?” Steve says quietly, Jonathan’s expression immediately sours and he stands up.

“You don’t control me!” He snaps, and Steve drops his face into his hand and pushes his fingers against his closed eyelids.

“I’m sorry, Jonny.” He murmurs, and Jonathan seems to deflate without any anger directed at him in return. He glances from Steve over to Scully, and then he briefly looks at Mulder before scratching at his scalp for a moment. It’s almost as if he seems to realize they’re in the room, watching him, and he shuffles uncomfortably.

“Attic,” He murmurs, and then he’s stepping out of the room and

heading upstairs with almost silent footsteps. Scully notes that he carries himself very lightly, like he was always sneaking about, a soft presence. Steve doesn't stop him, doesn't pay his sudden absence any mind, just waits for Jonathan to be completely out of earshot before speaking up again.

"Even if we do tell you, you can't do anything." Steve tells them after a few tense and quiet moments of the young man rubbing at his face in anxiety. He seemed far more wound up than Jonathan had, he looked tired too, being a caretaker of someone like Jonathan must take a lot out of him.

"If you do tell us, we can look into it and try to expose this." Mulder gets to his feet and approaches carefully, Scully can practically see the wariness written all over Steve. "I've lived a life of trying to expose things the government hides from us, I've been called crazy and deluded since I was your age but that hasn't stopped me." He insists, and Steve's jaw tightens a little as he looks up at Mulder.

"I'm just trying to protect them," The young man says, eyes glistening with emotion. He looks a little older then, like he's seen things he shouldn't have, and Scully is extremely familiar with seeing it on a day to day basis in the mirror and in the eyes of her partner. "We're allowed to live as long as we don't leave town and we don't tell anyone." He finally admits to them.

"Leave town for how long?" Scully inquires, and Steve looks over at her with a pained expression. His lips twist into a frustrated and sad scowl, he sighs shakily.

"At all, for the rest of our lives," He confesses. "If we try to leave, bad things happen. Will and Joyce tried visiting a relative a while back, a

car rammed into them on the highway when they were leaving." He tells them, wringing his hands anxiously. "Jonathan said it would happen, he kept saying they were breaking the rules… He kept saying that 'they' would follow protocol."

"Who is 'they' exactly? Do you know any faces, any names?" Mulder prompts, and Steve slowly shakes his head.

"Jonathan's mind is in pieces, and the times when it isn't he keeps things to himself." He explains, getting to his feet and walking towards the door. "Just one second, I need to grab something." And then he's walking up the steps in a hurried fashion, Mulder and Scully look to each other once more and Mulder sinks down on the couch next to her.

"How can we trust that they're telling the truth?" Scully questions, and Mulder, for once, doesn't offer any nonsensical answers. The man simply shrugs at her, appearing as if he was having the same doubts. "What if Jonathan does remember more than he's letting on?" She suggests hesitantly, and Mulder makes a face.

"We can't go accusing a traumatized kid of lying about his experience." He argues, and Scully rolls her eyes.

"I'm not an idiot, Mulder, I'm just saying maybe we can coax him into the truth." She whispers, the older man casting a cautious glance to the doorway just as footsteps are heard heading downstairs.

"I write down a lot of the stuff Jonathan says in here that doesn't make sense… Names, repeated phrases, stuff like that." He holds up a

small black notebook, pausing for a moment when Mulder reaches his hand out for it, like he was debating handing it over or not.

"Why would you write this down if you weren't planning on getting help?" Scully asks quietly, Steve sighs and hands the book over.

"I wanted a plan B." He explains, sitting down on the edge of the coffee table as Scully and Mulder open the notebook and flip through it.

Scully's eyes scan over the words on the first page, messily scrawled but still legible.

Protocol Alpha

Save 24.

Code 12, promises.

6 keeps me safe.

Agreement 4, release is mandatory.

There are tally marks next to a few of them, most noticeably the last one. Scully frowns and taps the paper, counting out seventeen tally marks, turning the book to face Steve.

"What do the tally marks mean?" She questions quietly, and Steve scratches at his head.

“It’s how many times he’s said it, he repeats himself a lot.” Steve divulges, glancing behind him almost nervously. “When he gets touched when he doesn’t want to be touched, he says ‘six’ a lot… He has chronic pain, and he’ll have freak outs when it’s too much to handle, he’ll talk about ‘Ghost Protocol’ and execution.” Steve’s next breath quivers slightly and he shakes his head before wiping at his mouth.

“What about Agreement 4?” Mulder asks, and Steve bites his lip.

“He says that when he has an attack and I have to restrain him.” He whispers, wringing his hands guiltily. “He’ll scream it at the top of his lungs, cry, hyperventilate. He’ll beg me to release him, but if I do he’ll either run or hurt himself.” He rubs at his eyes with the back of his arm, sniffling softly. “I don’t know how to help him sometimes, he’s in so much pain all the time, but I can’t do a damn thing about it.” He huffs, voice trembling and choked.

“I know this is hard for you, but you have to be honest with us right now. Do you know who we came in contact with in the facility that looked like Jonathan?” Scully asks suddenly, and Steve wipes his face once more as he gathers himself.

“N-No, weird stuff happens around here but I’m not really in the know about it. I mean the only person who really knows anything mildly about it all is-“

“Nancy!” They all startle, hearing Jonathan’s feet come pounding down the stairs. He leans in, grinning excitedly and hopping in place a few times. He looks completely different, his energy much more rampant and positive than it had been earlier. “Nancy’s here!” He hisses, and Steve frowns.

“You sure, Jonny?” He questions, and Scully looks to Mulder in confusion. She hadn’t heard a car door, or a knock at the door either.

“I feel her, she’s here!” Jonathan taps at his chest insistently, and Steve gets to his feet. The agents follow the two young men into the foyer, Jonathan stands anxiously at the door as Steve unlocks the deadbolts and pulls the door open. To the rest of their surprise, there’s a young woman walking up to the door with a suitcase in her hand.

“Nancy, what are you doing here?” Steve asks with a quiet laugh; the young woman steps up onto the porch and hands her suitcase off to Steve with a smile.

“I can’t visit my two best friends?” She questions in return, stepping through the door and getting engulfed in a hug from Jonathan. “Hi Jonathan, how’s it going?” She asks, pulling him back to hold him at arm’s length and look him up and down appraisingly.

“Good, good, good! I got you a box!” He tugs on Nancy’s shirt sleeve, who laughs in delight and looks to Steve in slight confusion.

“He got you a present, spent forever on it actually.” Steve explains with a wave of his hand, Nancy pulls her hand gently from Jonathan’s grip.

“Go get it for me, okay?” She hugs him tight and the young man buries his face in her shoulder for a few seconds before breaking

away and rushing up the stairs again. “He gets more and more energetic every time I see him.” She comments, stepping forward to hug Steve just as tightly, she looks at Mulder and Scully standing off to the side over Steve’s shoulder and steps back.

“He has his ups and downs,” Steve admits awkwardly, and Nancy nods her head distractedly.

“Who’s this?” She questions, Steve turns his head.

“Nancy, these are two agents from the FBI, they’re investigating Will and Jonathan’s cases.” He says with a small gesture of his hand. “Agent Scully and Mulder, this is my friend Nancy Wheeler.” He introduces, Mulder holds out his hand to shake the young woman’s.

“Steve, I know you’re not trying to stir things up.” Nancy says, ignoring the outstretched hand and turning to the young man, crossing her arms.

“We’re investigating of our own volition,” Scully inputs, and Nancy levels her with a glare.

“You’re putting everyone in danger, is what you’re doing.” She snaps, voice quiet, just as Jonathan comes scrambling back down the stairs.

“Here, Nancy.” He hands her a box, wrapped messily with Christmas wrapping paper, the young woman smiles at him and sinks down on the stairs to open the box. Jonathan joins her on the steps, sitting

beside her and smiling excitedly as she opens it.

“What’s this?” She pulls out a large scrapbook, which has been covered in a collage of pictures of flowers and brightly colored things.

“So you don’t miss us,” Jonathan elaborates as she opens the book, revealing many pictures lined up page to page in rows. Nancy lets out a soft gasp, tracing a finger over a picture of herself with Jonathan and Steve the first time she’d come home after Jonathan had returned. His scars were a little more prominent then, but he was dozing on Steve’s shoulder and Nancy was sprawled over their laps. She flips through a few of the pages, in awe of the careful amount of detail, the organization of all the photos.

“Thank you, Jonathan.” She turns and pulls him into a hug, which he quickly reciprocates. “I love it, so much.” She murmurs, and Jonathan nods his head as he’s released. There’s a shift in his body language suddenly, like what had possessed him to be so happy and upbeat had left him. He gets up and frowns at Mulder and Scully, staring at them warily, before pointing at Mulder.

“Samantha,” He says quietly, and Mulder’s eyes widen comically.

“W-What did you just say?” He asks, going pale with disbelief, Scully’s eyes widen a little as well.

“You know,” Jonathan mumbles, looking away and seeming to lose his train of thought, blinking furiously a few times. “I want Elle.” He says suddenly, reaching up to bury his fingers in his hair just to tug

on it gently. “Steve, call Elle?” He turns his head, stepping closer to the older boy, who pulls him close and holds him tight.

“Something wrong, Jonny?” Steve questions, swaying them back and forth together for a moment.

“I’ll call her,” Nancy volunteers, reaching out to pet Jonathan’s back gently. She then turns to the agents, Scully observing carefully and Mulder still looking shell-shocked. “I think it’d be better if you left, agents.” She says sternly, and the agents simply nod their heads compliantly.

“S-Stop,” Jonathan pulls from Steve’s grip slightly, reaching out and grabbing hold of Scully’s jacket sleeve with gentle but insistent fingers. He carefully wraps his fingers around her wrist, frowning down at it for a moment before glancing up at her face. “Be careful, they don’t keep their word.” He whispers, then releases her and shuffles closer to Steve, tucking his face against the older man’s chest.

The rest of them stand quietly for a moment, absorbing his words, and then Nancy gestures the agents to the door. They step out and Nancy shuts the door, running a hand through her hair.

“I want Elle,” Jonathan repeats suddenly as Nancy locks all the locks on the door, the young woman turns from the door and heads into the kitchen.

“Nancy’s gonna call her, Jonny, what’s the hurry to see her?” He questions, running gentle fingers through Jonathan’s hair and noting how oddly he seemed to be acting. The younger pulls from his

embrace, as if now not wanting the contact, doing a strange little spin and tensely walking away from him. Steve follows, slightly concerned that this might be something to do with his seizure.

“They won’t listen, they can’t see it.” Jonathan mumbles under his breath as he steps into the living room, Steve shoots an anxious glance towards the kitchen.

“Nancy, can you put off the call for a minute?” He asks aloud, startling when Jonathan grabs the wooden chair in the corner and throws it carelessly, it slides across the floor with no clear target and thuds quietly against the wall. “Jonathan, hey…” He steps a little closer to where the young man is spinning and pacing with agitation.

“I want Elle, she knows…” Jonathan murmurs a bit louder, shaking his head and twisting his fingers in the sleeve of his shirt. Nancy steps back into the room, eyes wary as she looks to Steve for information.

“He had a seizure earlier, I think he’s having an episode.” Steve sighs, holding an arm up when Jonathan tries to walk past him, confining him to the area. Nancy steps a little closer and holds out her hand in Jonathan’s direction, the young man turns his head in the opposite direction and audibly shudders.

“Jonathan, can I see your eyes?” Nancy asks over Jonathan’s quiet mumbling, the boy makes a scoffing noise and shuts his eyes purposefully. That was a good sign, it meant he could understand them to some degree. “Can you get him to sit?” She directs at Steve, who shuffles forward just a bit to carefully touch Jonathan’s arm.

“Six keeps me safe, but I can’t feel it anymore.” He reaches up and twitches his fingers against Steve’s chest, not keeping him back forcefully but creating a barrier between them. He moves restlessly, shifting back and forth in a repetitive almost rocking motion as he maneuvers his weight from one leg to the other. There are tears glistening in his eyes, voice starting to tremble, Steve is as usual at a loss for what to do.

“Jonny, you’re safe here.” He reminds him quietly, taking the hand resting on his chest and rubbing his thumb over the back of Jonathan’s knuckles. “You’re at home, and I’m here, and Nancy’s here. She came all this way just to see us, don’t you want to talk to her?” He asks, Jonathan shakes his head jerkily. “No? Nancy’s your best friend, why not?” He asks quietly.

“Can’t be trusted,” He whispers, suddenly pulling his hand away. “It’s not safe.”

“You can trust me though, right, Jonny boy?” He holds his hand out; Jonathan’s aimlessly twitching eyes focus on the offered appendage. “It’s just Steve, you know that.” He wiggles his fingers gently, Jonathan steps back and his eyes flicker over to Nancy.

“N-No,” He shakes his head, reaching up to tug harshly at his bangs. “She’s not safe, I want Elle. Six is gone, they’ll find me!” He lets out a sob of a noise and in his hurry to step back, he falls over the coffee table and hits the floor between the table and the couch.

“I think it’d be a good idea for me to get out of his sight for a while. I might be triggering bad memories or something,” Nancy explains quietly, taking a few steps back.

“A-Are you sure? I really wanted someone with medical knowledge to check him over.” Steve says uncertainly, and Nancy shakes her head.

“He’s probably just overwhelmed, I’m gonna go check in with my parents. If this persists, you’ll have to force him to take his pills and bring him to the hospital.” She tells him, Steve grimaces and she nods her head. “If he slurs his words in any way or he’s still confused by later this afternoon you need to bring him in.” She insists, and he nods.

“Okay, yeah I will.” He agrees, watching the girl step into the foyer and glance back at Jonathan. The young man was currently curling up into a ball on the floor and mumbling to himself, rocking back and forth. Steve runs a hand through his hair and crouches down, placing the table between himself and Jonathan. “Jonny, look.” He points to the doorway leading to the foyer as the front door shuts behind Nancy.

The younger glances up, muttering something about not being able to feel ‘it’ anymore, and peers around the room warily. When he doesn’t find Nancy, his anxious rocking starts to calm, Steve finds it easier to pull in his next breath. Jonathan gets up on his knees and shuffles around the table, forcing himself into Steve’s arms and hugging him. Steve takes a moment to run a hand through his messy hair and rub his back before getting up and pulling Jonathan with him.

“Is Elle coming?” Jonathan whispers, and Steve hums as he starts to lead Jonathan into the foyer. He lets Jonathan lock the locks, it always seems to settle his nerves to know that they are closed off from the world.

“I think we’ll call Elle later, how about we go up in the attic and relax for a bit?” He questions, Jonathan’s face scrunches up slightly and Steve grimaces when he reaches up to pull at his bangs again. He doesn’t want to frustrate him too much, it could send him into a fit and then he might have to sedate him or hold him down at least. Jonathan was already exhausted, he couldn’t have that, he couldn’t risk it.

“Elle, I want Elle.” He tries to pull away from Steve, who keeps a firm grip around his waist.

“Okay, okay… I’ll call Elle, will that make you happy?” He asks with a small smile, Jonathan nods quickly and lets out a sigh of relief. Jonathan follows him pliantly this time, and Steve finds himself breathing a sigh of relief as Jonathan takes hold of his shirt gently.

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“He said Samantha, Scully, you heard him!” Mulder says as they walk back to the car, the man was practically losing his mind. As they pull out from the driveway, Nancy comes out of the door, walking over to her car and pulling out what looked to be an extremely old cellphone. She presses a few buttons, then puts the thing to her ear, talking angrily for a couple of moments and then hanging up.

"I don't know what I just witnessed, Mulder." Scully mutters, watching the young woman.

Nancy glances around, her eyes finding the car that Mulder and Scully are in, and her gaze narrows slightly in suspicion. Scully pulls

her foot off the break and starts to drive again, knowing they had overstayed their welcome. She starts to think as they drive, going over all they had received so far, heading back automatically to the motel.

As soon as they pull up into the parking lot, two men get out of a black car nearby and start walking over to the car. Scully's hand automatically reaches for her gun, then she sees one man flash a badge that reads CIA. She quickly rolls down her window, a man leans over and observes them both carefully.

"I'm going to need you two to step out of the car and come with us," He says quietly, Scully glances over to Mulder, his expression mildly angry. They were in for it now, but this just proved that something was definitely going on. They're escorted from the car, across the parking lot to their car. Scully reaches for the door handle and suddenly Mulder lets out a shout, hands grab her from behind and then she's being hauled backwards into a large van.

The doors close before Scully can even figure out what's happening, their hands are quickly cuffed to the bench they're seated on and they're taking off from the motel. Mulder is fighting tooth and nail against the men, but he's quieted with a hard knock of his head against the wall behind him.

"Mulder, stop!" She snaps, he glares at her and then clenches his jaw, turning his eyes to the two men sitting across from them.

"This is about our investigation, the kids were right, you're threatening them!" He snaps, the men don't respond, don't do anything more than stare at them blankly. Scully can't help but think of the others, would they just take Scully and Mulder or would they

go after Jonathan and Steve too?

She rattles her hands in her cuffs, glancing in irritation out two windows on the back doors, which were small and gave her barely any view of outside. They were in serious trouble, yet again, but hopefully they could get out. They would think of something, she would think of something.

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The sound of multiple cars pulling up to the house has Elle and Will rushing to the windows, Joyce in tow. The sight of men in black suits getting out and coming to the door sends a jolt of fear through Will, he staggers back and grabs his step-sister by the hand. They had to get out, they had to run, they couldn't be caught.

"Take the back door, find your brother and Steve." Joyce says quietly, ushering them towards the kitchen, Will looks back at her with worry. There's a loud knock on the front door, Elle tugs Will towards the back door. She pulls open the back door and a man is standing there, Will yanks her back behind him.

"Run, kids!" Joyce shouts from the living room, Will turns his head and is ripped up off the floor by the man.

"Mom!" He screams as another man pulls Elle away from him. "Leave them alone!" He snarls, reaching his hand back and knocking the man holding him in the face. The man staggers slightly and then pins Will, storming from the house and heading around towards a van.

“You let him go!” Joyce rushes from the house, only to be pulled back, tears in her eyes. “That’s my boy, you can’t take him!” She insists, there’s a sudden crash from inside the house.

“Mom, find Hop!” He calls out as he’s thrown into the back of a van, landing by the feet of a few people seated on benches.

“Will!” He looks up, finding Scully and Mulder staring down at him with concern. The van door slams shut and he can hear his mother still shouting, he’s yanked up onto a bench and one of his hands is cuffed down.

“This is your fault,” Will hisses quietly, tears in his eyes as he pulls weakly on the metal cuff. “We’re gonna die and it’s all your fault.” He wipes at his face with his free hand, feeling the car take off onto the road.

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He had a feeling this might happen, he shouldn’t have said anything, he regrets it all as he listens to men banging on the door. Jonathan stands next to him, his hands over his ears and his eyes wide with absolute horror. Steve knows in this moment that he’d let the young man down, he couldn’t protect him anymore. After a few loud slams the door busts down, Steve lifts his bat and shoves Jonathan behind him automatically.

“You stay the fuck away,” He snaps as soon as a man storms inside, a

gun in his hand, Steve waves his bat. If they wanted Jonathan, they'd have to take him down first. He shouldn't have talked to those agents, they probably went and reported to their superiors immediately. He couldn't let Jonathan go back to that place, he'd rather they be executed.

"Steve," Jonathan grabs his hand and Steve locks their fingers, looking back at the younger's terrified gaze. He was pale with fear, hand trembling in Steve's, but he looked strikingly clear-headed. "I-I love you," Steve's eyes automatically well with tears, Jonathan was facing his worst nightmare and still had the mind to say a final goodbye. Steve doesn't even react when the bat is smacked from his hand, he's wrenched around and pulled from Jonathan.

"Leave him alone!" Steve shouts as another man grabs Jonathan, the younger struggling wildly as his arms are forced behind him. "He didn't do anything!" His voice shakes with emotion and a few tears drip from his eyes as Jonathan starts to scream for Steve, kicking his legs and trying to get away.

They're both dragged from the house, Steve's eyes widen when the doors of the van in the driveway open to reveal not only the agents from earlier but Will as well. All three of them are cuffed to little holders on the bench they're seated on, Will's eyes widen at the sight of them.

"Steve!" Will says, sounding absolutely dismayed, Jonathan is yanked up into the van by two men. He's breathing heavy, kicking hard and getting in a few good hits. A man grabs his arm and Jonathan grabs his finger and forces it back harshly, the man shouts and lets him go just as the other man gets his cuffed hand attached to the bench.

“Son of a bitch,” He backhands Jonathan hard across the face and Will’s leg flies out automatically, knocking him hard in the knee. The man stumbles, cursing up a storm.

“Leave him alone!” Will sneers, just as Steve snarls out “I’ll kill you!”

Steve is pulled up into the car, thrown onto the opposite bench while the two men that had hauled them out jump down. One of the men on the opposite bench moves towards the small barred up window that peered into the cabin where the driver was, sinking on the bench under it with his colleague and reaching back to pound his fist against the wall twice as the back doors shut.

As the truck takes off again, there’s only the sound of Steve’s heavy breathing and Jonathan’s panicked mumbling and sniffling as tears leak down his face. There’s a red mark forming on his cheek, the faint lines of the man’s hand leaving its print behind. Steve’s face is damp with tears, but his eyes are hard, and his jaw is clenched, angry but resigned. Will is the closest to Jonathan, between Scully and his older brother, leaning close and resting his hand gently on the young man. They had cuffed both of his hands, he was too dangerous, too uncaring about his own safety to be trusted to have one hand free like Mulder, Scully, and Will.

“All this time I spent trying to keep everyone safe,” Steve says quietly, shaking his head.

“Steve, you’re going to get out of this.” Scully says with certainty, Steve’s eyes scroll over to hers, anger and resignation replaced with a silent fear.

“Full offense, fuck you, this is your fault.” He tugs on his cuffs, double cuffed just like his lover. “You ruined everything, we were just fine. We had a nice place to live, everyone alive and safe. I don’t know what you think is going to happen, but I can tell you what’s going to happen.” He snaps, hands balling into fists.

“Steve, you’re scaring Jonathan.” Will scolds quietly, trying to calm the man who was currently tugging roughly in panic on his cuffs, breathing heavily and mumbling under his breath frantically.

“We’ll be lucky if we die, agent Scully.” Steve says, losing all of his heat in an instant. His eyes are soft as they focus on Jonathan, looking desperate to reach out but unable to do so. “Jonny-boy, look at me.” He urges, repeats himself a few times until Jonathan stops his struggling and focuses watery eyes on the older boy. “I love you, okay? I can’t control what happens, but they can’t take that from us, ever.” He promises, Jonathan whimpers quietly and tears drip down Steve’s face.

“They’ll kill us,” Jonathan says softly, Steve uses his shoulder to wipe at his tear stained face, sniffling loudly.

“It doesn’t matter, you’re my best friend in the whole world. I wouldn’t trade the last few years of my life for any normal life if I couldn’t have you.” He insists, Jonathan nods his head and looks down at the floor.

“Steve,” Will murmurs, wiping at his face where new tears were falling.

“Even if I go to hell your mom is going to track me down and torture me herself for letting you two get hurt again.” Steve shakes his head, shakily sighing and knocking his head back against the wall. “I’m sorry, kid.” He mutters.

“No, I…” Will wipes at his face again, glancing over at Jonathan and giving Steve a significant look. “Remember February, when Jonathan had that really bad episode?” He questions softly, Steve’s eyebrows scrunch together and he blinks the rest of his tears away. “Wouldn’t want a repeat of that, right?” He says, leaning back against the wall and looking over at Scully and Mulder nonchalantly.

“Right, we shouldn’t scare him.” Steve agrees, clearing his throat and shifting in his seat. “It’d be pointless to talk about how they probably won’t kill us. They’ll hurt us.” He says quietly, Jonathan’s face twitches and he turns his eyes back to his handcuffs.

“Probably cut us open, electrocute us.” Will says, head turned towards Jonathan. “They’ll hurt us Jonathan, they’re taking us back to that place.” Jonathan jerks suddenly, his breaths loud in the cabin.

“What are you doing?” Mulder hisses, Steve shakes his head.

“Jonathan, you’ll be going back. They’ll make you forget, they’ll put you in the dark and make you forget.” Steve snaps, Jonathan starts to thrash, metal clanging loudly as he pries frantically at the handcuffs confining him.

“No, no, no, no!” Jonathan starts to shout, wrenching his hands against his cuffs and turning all the way around to press one of his

feet to the wall. “I can’t forget! They’ll open my head, put things inside me, I can’t!” His voice raises into a shrill scream, one of the men get up.

“Stop that!” The man snaps, grabbing Jonathan’s shoulder.

“I won’t!” Jonathan shouts, there’s a sickening crunch of a noise and then suddenly Jonathan throws his elbow back and catches the man in the groin. The man hits the ground and Steve quickly kicks the man hard in the back of the head.

“Hey!” The other man stands up, pulling out his gun, Mulder lunges and hits the man in the arm. The gun clatters across the van floor, sliding to the back doors.

“Jonathan, the keys!” Will snaps, Jonathan leans over and grabs the gun instead, his thumb looks odd, out of place or broken from the pressure he’d put on it. He turns his arm and fires, the truck’s tires screech and everyone covers their ears as the close quarters shot sounds ten times as deafening. There’s a jerk and then suddenly they’re spinning.

There’s the grind and crash of metal as they roll uncontrollably, the sounds of their screams are quiet compared to the loud rumble of the car tumbling down and down and down.

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The guards fly with the momentum, the others holding on as best they can as they tumble like a dryer on high. When they stop, the truck is laying on its side, Will, Mulder, Scully, and Jonathan all sprawled out and Steve hanging from the other side with his feet just off of the ground and his hands gripping the bench. There's still a loud ringing in everyone's ears, from the impact and the gunshot mixing together, but as sound filters in it feels ten times more chaotic.

Steve is shouting obscenities, out of breath and kicking his legs, trying to get out of his handcuffs and calling out for Jonathan and Will. Will is motionless, laying awkwardly on one of his arms, and Jonathan is crying and mumbling incoherently between sobs. Scully checks Mulder, who is sitting up and only looking mildly disoriented, mostly unharmed. There's blood smeared all over the walls of the compartment, but it's probably from the guard that's laying near the ceiling with a gunshot wound to his stomach. The other guard is near him, laying in an impossible position and most likely dead from the looks of it.

"Everyone okay?" Scully says as she gets her wits together, sitting up and feeling the aches and pains of the jostling already starting to set in. She turns to Will, the young man must have hit his head because there's an impressive bump near his temple and he's out cold.

"Jonny's the only one that can reach the keys," Steve says immediately, Scully turns her eyes to the young man. He's curled up on his side, faced away from them, with one hand on his head and the other still cuffed. His shoulders are quivering and he's crying so harshly that it's impossible to hear what exactly he's rambling about.

"Jonathan," She calls, Mulder moves and joins her, they all call out for the young man a few times. He starts to calm down after a

minute, sniffling as his words start to quiet, he coughs a few times and groans.

“Jonny, we can’t get out unless you get the keys.” Steve coaxes, the young man looks over at Steve with bleary eyes and rubs his head gently. “Get the keys, Jonathan, just there.” He points with his foot, Jonathan turns his head and spots the guards, Scully prepares for another freak-out, but he doesn’t react to the bloody and horrific scene.

“Keys,” Jonathan mumbles, scooting towards the guards clumsily and straining to reach out for them. He pulls on his remaining handcuff, which had bloodied his wrists in his earlier struggle. He latches onto one of the guard’s shoes, then slowly tugs him closer. “Agreement four,” He says in a strained whisper as he reaches out and snags the keys from the man’s belt.

“Hand agent Scully the keys, Jonathan.” Steve instructs, but Jonathan is busy uncuffing himself. It takes a moment with his messed-up hand, but he eventually releases himself and then tosses the keys in Scully’s direction carelessly. “Stay there, Jonny.” Steve urges as the young man gets up, leaning against the door.

Scully quickly unlocks the cuffs on Mulder and herself, then moves to help Steve. The young man thrashes anxiously in the air when Jonathan pushes open one of the heavy metal doors.

“Jonathan, stay there, please.” Scully insists as she starts to help Steve down, Mulder scrambles across the metal cabin when Jonathan doesn’t listen. He follows the young man out of the van and out of sight, Steve hits the metal siding with a grunt, falling to his knees and quickly righting himself.

“Jonathan,” Steve hurries out of the truck, leaving Scully behind with an unconscious Will. She leans over and checks the boy’s pulse, then unlocks his handcuff. She strips off her jacket and pushes it under the boy’s head, then joins the others outside. Steve and Jonathan are gone, she wonders briefly where they are but is distracted by assessing the situation.

Mulder steps closer to the truck as Scully slips out, adjusting her hair and glancing around to observe their surroundings. They must have tumbled off the road, the only thing in sight is trees and there’s a steep and long incline that had only ended with the vehicle slamming into a tree. The sound of the truck door opening with a loud metal shriek has her and Mulder looking back,

“Put your hands up,” A man says as he appears from the side, a gun held out and blood trickling down his temple. Scully and Mulder both hold up their hands, Scully’s eyes widen as Jonathan appears from behind the truck.

“Igra zakonchena.” The words are spoke in a rasp, the young man’s eyes cold and hard as he grabs the man’s arm and forces it into a sickening direction with a loud crack. He screams, falling to the ground and letting go of the gun, it falls to the ground. Jonathan reaches down, positioning an arm around the flailing man’s neck.

“Jonny, no!” Steve comes scattering down the incline, his feet sliding as he tries not to face plant down the hill. The second Steve reaches for him as he approaches, Jonathan turns and clasps a hand around the older boy’s throat. “Jonathan!” He chokes, Mulder steps forward carefully as Scully leans down to pick up the man’s gun.

Jonathan says something else, and Scully realizes with surprise that it sounds Russian. He sounds almost puzzled, and then suddenly he releases Steve's throat, the young man collapsing onto the ground in a half-conscious daze. The driver is on the ground, whimpering and moaning, his arm bent out of place.

"Jonathan," Scully says quietly, the young man's hands twitch at his sides and he turns his head. "Your brother is hurt, we need to get help. Do you think that you could stay here with agent Mulder while I get help?" She asks gently, trying to get ahold of the gentle young man that was currently being overridden by some form of traumatic stress response.

"Help?" He repeats, Scully nods her head slowly. "Hopper." He croaks, then turns and starts walking, past Steve and further into the woods.

"No, Jonathan!" She calls out, glancing down at Steve and then looking back at Mulder.

"I'll go after him," Mulder suggests, Scully shakes her head and lowers the gun down to her side.

"I'll go, you go up the hill and flag someone." She insists. Jonathan was only agitated by Mulder, he'd be no help in trying to calm him down and talk to him.

"Scully," Mulder warns, giving her that 'I know better than you' look that she hates so much. She returns it, and the man quickly folds under her stare. "Be careful." He urges, she nods and heads off into

the woods after Jonathan.

Notes for the Chapter:

(Just for anyone wondering, Mulder had a sister named Samantha that went mysteriously missing when they were young. The words Jonathan said in Russian were "game over", but I just got that online because I don't speak Russian. Anyways, hope this chapter wasn't too awful, I miss working on this story but I don't know if I'm any good at it anymore so make sure you leave a comment telling me if you liked it!)